

HOME CINEMA

HIGH-PERFORMANCE SOUND & VISION

Choice

REVIEWS

Sony VW260ES
4K projector
B&O Eclipse TV
Sky Soundbox
Amazon Fire TV
Roku Express
Samsung
UE49MU8000

PREMIUM UPGRADES

LG G7 OLED, KEF Q series and Denon X6400H
push your system to new heights!

XMAS!
34 AV treats
to buy for
yourself

HE'S BACK!

Spider-Man swings
onto 4K Blu-ray in
...Homecoming, p102

FILM & TV

- GAME OF THRONES S7
- VALERIAN
- ATOMIC BLONDE
- ANNABELLE 2

INSIDE BUYER'S GUIDE → READER'S ROOM → BRAWL IN CELL BLOCK 99
→ COLLECTING... MARVEL MOVIES → WHARFEDALE DX-2 → OPINION → MUBI

Atmos awe

7.2.2 cinema install
blows us away

Xbox One X

Game on in 4K HDR!

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Power cable not shown.

QLED TV

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE: December 21, 2017



Welcome

Gaming can be a divisive topic amongst home cinema fans. One on side, there are those who have built their AV system to watch movies and nothing else (it's called home cinema, after all). On the other are console enthusiasts who see bigscreen, surround sound gaming as a natural extension of their hobby. Why limit your cinema room to just one job? Between the two are people like myself – happy to spend time **eradicating aliens in a fictional universe** with a big laser gun, but usually happier watching Tom Cruise do it.



Wherever you sit on the gaming scale, consoles like the Xbox One X (see p58) are technically impressive. This super-powered black box embraces a new era of native 4K HDR gaming with 3D audio soundtracks, a perfect fit for your lovingly assembled cinema system. Even if you've never seen the attraction of adding gaming to your movie diet, this might just turn your head...

Mark Craven
Editor



MENU



CONTRIBUTORS



John Archer:
The UK's most experienced TV tester cut his teeth as an early HCC staffer



Jon Thompson:
Film producer and post-production expert delves deep into Hollywood and AV



Steve May:
HCC's former Editor-in-Chief is one of the UK's most respected AV journo



Martin Pipe:
Technical expert Martin is renowned throughout the home cinema industry



Richard Stevenson:
Industry veteran and former Editor of UK CE trade journal ERT



Danny Phillips:
A former editor of *What Video* magazine, now a certified home cinema audio buff

FEATURES

In-depth interviews and special reports. Starts... p20

COVER STORY

20 Jingle all the AV way

Treat yourself to something special from our Xmas wishlist of system-boosting goodies

26 Jailhouse shock!

We grill writer/director S. Craig Zahler about new action thriller *Brawl in Cell Block 99*

COVER STORY

34 Red room of pleasure

This state-of-the-art 7.2.2 Atmos cinema room will leave you drooling...

88 Certified: AV-Holic

Another HCC reader shows off their setup

SELECT

The place to look if you're planning to buy some new AV gear. Starts... p111

111 Gear guide

HCC's comprehensive Top 10s list only the very best kit money can buy

BULLETIN

The place for hot products, trends and technology. Starts... p7

07 Budget bundle!

Wharfedale's affordable new speaker array

08 Audio at a Kanta

Focal adds to its Classic Home Audio lineup

09 Brand fave returns to TV

Ferguson 4K flatscreens hit the high street

10 Nvidia upgrades Shield

Media streamer now smarter than ever

12 Better audio for everyone

Hi-res audio is getting ready to join the mainstream, says industry

14 Beach boys

Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* hits 4K Blu-ray

16 Back of the 'net

Trailers and tech to check out on the web

17 11-channel box of tricks

Marantz shows off its new flagship AVR

REGULARS

Whether you want our opinions or your own, here's where to look. Starts... p77

77 Digital Copy

Mark Craven is haunted by what a hard drive error could do to his film collection

78 Film Fanatic

Anton van Beek curates a Christmas list of unexpected movies

80 In the Mix

Jon Thompson is hacked off with HDR10

84 Feedback

Share your thoughts with other AV addicts

122 AV Avenger

When it comes to cinema rooms, Steve May explains why size really does matter...

COMPETITIONS

87 Great Blu-rays to be won!

Game of Thrones, *Valerian...*, *Atomic Blonde* and *The Hitman's Bodyguard*



42

'KEF's Uni-Q driver is able to do things that are unusual at the price...'



46



50



54



58



REVIEWS

With a focus on performance, these are in-depth tests you can trust... p41

COVER STORY

42 KEF Q Series 5.1.2

Push your setup to new heights with this superb floorstanding speaker array

COVER STORY

46 Denon AVR-X6400H

Got an 11-speaker setup? This AVR will feed it Atmos, DTS:X and Auro3D

COVER STORY

50 LG OLED65G7

Does this 4K screen – ranged between W7 and E7 series – hit the cinematic sweetspot?

54 Sony VPL-VW260ES

Native 4K HDR projector will tempt anyone spec'ing a dedicated movie den

COVER STORY

58 Xbox One X

It's game on in native 4K HDR with Microsoft's most powerful console to date

62 Amazon Fire TV 2017

Capable next-gen UHD streaming dongle with added Alexa functionality

64 Samsung UE49MU8000

Smart-laden mid-size edge-lit LED TV

66 Sky Soundbox

Innovative TV audio sound system

68 Bang & Olufsen Eclipse

55in 4K OLED with integrated soundbar

70 Roku Express

Straightforward 1080p streaming stick

70 Mubi

On-demand service that targets film fans looking beyond the mainstream

71 Blue Microphones Ella

Passive headphones with in-built amp

74 Long-term test: Samsung 65KS9500

This 2016 flagship LED flatscreen is still a master at handling 4K Blu-ray content

PLAYBACK



The latest Blu-rays, DVDs and videogames reviewed and rated. Starts... p93

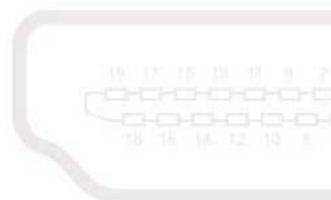
- 94 Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets 3D
- 95 Annabelle: Creation; Batman vs Two-Face; Fear the Walking Dead: Season Three; Legion: Season One
- 96 Super Mario Odyssey; The Wages of Fear; The Philadelphia Story; House of Wax 3D
- 97 Atomic Blonde
- 98 Game of Thrones: Season Seven; Girls Trip; The Lure; My Cousin Rachel; The Villainess
- 100 Hammer: Volume One – Fear Warning!
- 101 George A. Romero: Between Night and Dawn; The Jabberwocky; Black Christmas; The Haunting; Torture Garden
- 102 Spider-Man: Homecoming [4K]
- 104 War for the Planet of the Apes [4K]
- 105 Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales [4K] (US Import); Apollo 13 [4K]; Baywatch: Extended Edition [4K]; Wonder Woman [4K]
- 106 Bram Stoker's Dracula: 25th Anniversary [4K]; Serenity [4K]; The Mummy [4K]; The Purge: 3-Movie Collection [4K]
- 108 **COLLECTING...** Marvel movies
Satisfy your need for superhero spectacle with 10 top comic book blockbusters



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BULLETIN

→ **News Highlights** **FOCAL** Kanta floorstanders promise good looks, good sound
MARANTZ The AV marque joins the 11-channel receiver gang **NVIDIA** Shield STB embraces AI
OPTOMA 4K PJ with laser light **WEBWATCH** Click here for trailers, tech **NEWS X10** The hottest news stories in bite-sized chunks **DUNKIRK** Epic WWII drama drops anchor on 4K BD & MORE!

Budget bundle!

Wharfedale DX-2 → www.wharfedale.co.uk



Wharfedale is following its Diamond 11 HCP speaker pack (see *HCC* #279) with an even more affordable 5.1 offering. The DX-2 is available now for a mere £450, and combines an 8in subwoofer with a quartet of compact satellites and centre enclosure, boasting driver and cabinet improvements over previous DX ranges. A satellite expansion pack (£100) allows buyers to step up to a 7.1 system. Don't fancy it in black? A white finish is promised to come along soon.

HCC ONLINE...

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Audio at a Kanta

Focal Kanta No.2 → www.focal.com/uk

A new addition to Focal's Classic Home Audio lineup, the Kanta No.2 is a three-way floorstander that wants to catch your eye as well as your ear. Priced at £6,500-per-pair, the speakers feature dual 6.5in bass drivers, a 6.5in mid-range and 1in Beryllium tweeter, mounted into a curved baffle for fine-tuned time alignment. The cabinets themselves are hewn from high density polymer, said to improve over typical MDF designs. Choose from high gloss or walnut veneer finishes for the cabinets, with various front baffle options.



NAD AVR goes live with Dirac



AV corp NAD has added Dirac Live EQ to its T583 V3, a Dolby Atmos receiver available for around £1,300.

Dirac adds extra sonic calibration to the NAD's seven-channel PowerDrive amplification and processing, joining a features roster that includes integration with Bluesound multiroom hardware, 4K HDR passthrough over HDMI, hi-res audio support including MQA, and a 'modular design construction' promising futureproof flexibility via replaceable AV boards. www.nadelectronics.com

All's Swell for Cabasse



Cabasse is thinking smallscale with its latest invention, targeting the UK's insatiable thirst for Bluetooth speakers

with its £230 Swell. Weighing 750g and offering an in-built rechargeable 10-hour battery, this portable speaker claims to retain the brand's 'dynamic and wholly natural' signature sound through a quartet of drivers and 60W amp tucked into its cylindrical chassis. Bluetooth hookup features NFC; an auxiliary input caters for wired sources. Two Swells can be run together in stereo mode. www.cabasse.com

Brand fave returns to TV

Ferguson 4K screens set to hit UK retailers under new ownership deal

The democratisation of 4K technology continues at a pace, and it continues to bring dormant TV brands back to life in Blighty. Ferguson, a stalwart of the UK consumer electronics industry during the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s, is reappearing on shop shelves, flaunting a new range of screens ranging from bedroom sets with built-in DVD players to 4K behemoths.

Now manufactured by UK corp Cello Electronics following an acquisition deal from Technicolor France (which itself purchased the brand from Thorn EMI in 1987), and with all TVs built at Cello's County Durham production line, the 2017 Ferguson lineup will be stocked country-wide in Euronics retailers initially, challenging the likes of Toshiba (another reinvigorated brand) and Hisense for a slice of the mid-market TV space.

'I started out in this business selling Ferguson to consumers and truly understand the trust people had in the brand over the years,' says Cello Electronics CEO Brian Palmer. 'Having now come full circle, I'm proud to have the opportunity to bring this iconic brand back into the UK market.'

Ferguson screen sizes will eventually reach from 24in to 75in, although production this year is skewed towards the 50in-75in range. At these sizes, 4K panels are used on all models except a 50in Full HD design, with curved

Ferguson is relaunching with TVs big and small...



Brian Palmer: 'I'm proud to have the opportunity to bring this iconic brand back into the UK market'

as well as flatscreens offered on 32in, 40in and 55in models.

The flagship set is the F75ANSMT4K, a £1,500 75in LED.

As with Cello-branded screens, it will employ an Android engine for smart entertainment, with supported apps including Netflix, YouTube, BBC iPlayer, Spotify and Kodi. A trim silver bezel and slender feet give it a tidy feel, although the presence of only two HDMI inputs gives away its affordable ethos somewhat.

Beneath this sit 65in, 55in and 50in UHD models, priced at £800, £580 and £500 respectively, plus a 43in 4K model at £450.

A 32in screen, the F3222FT2, will feature a built-in DVD player and HD ready resolution.

Absent are the integrated soundbars of Cello sets, or any HDR playback compatibility. But with screen real estate at these prices, buyers may not care.



Playlist...

Team HCC spins up its disc picks of the month

Transformers: The Last Knight (UHD Blu-ray)

Who cares if the story isn't up to much? With its Dolby Vision imagery and Atmos audio, this latest *Transformers* sequel is pure home cinema heaven on 4K BD.



The Conjuring (Blu-ray)



With the latest spin-off hitting BD this month (see p95) it felt only right to go back to where it all began with this slick fright flick.

The Big Sick (Region B Blu-ray)



Based on the real-life romance between its two stars, this smart, funny film proves that the rom-com is still in rude health.

Family Guy: Season 17 (R2 DVD)



The satirical 'toon is just as edgy and irreverent as ever – and we wouldn't want it any other way.

Fast & Furious 8 (UHD Blu-ray)



A belated UK release means that we've been enjoying the latest *Fast & Furious* in 4K all over again.

At the 'plex...

Heading out to see a flick?
Catch these this month

The Disaster Artist

December 01: James Franco directs and stars in this biographical comedy drama about the making of the 2003 cult film *The Room* – widely considered to be the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies.

Star Wars: The Last Jedi

December 14: Luke Skywalker! Supreme Leader Snoke! Porgs! That's right, the eighth film in the *Star Wars* saga will soon be with us and fans will finally get to uncover the many mysteries that have been teased – not least just who that ominous title really refers to.

Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle

December 20: Dwayne Johnson, Karen Gillan, Kevin Hart and Jack Black head up the cast of this sequel to the 1995 hit. This time around it's a *Jumanji* videogame that's causing all the trouble...

Nvidia upgrades Shield

Update enhances AI, but does it also spell the end of physical media?

Nvidia is giving UK users of its Shield TV media streamer an AI upgrade, rolling out full integration with Google Assistant. The move adds a raft of new functionality to the box, which will pit it against the new Amazon Fire 4K HDR TV dongle.

With Google integration, owners will be able to use voice commands to find content and navigate programmes (pausing, fast-forwarding or rewinding as required), and see visual answers from Google, as well as get a spoken reply, to any questions asked.

Nvidia is also bundling interoperability with Samsung's SmartThings home technology platform, enabling it to interact with compatible devices.

'Being an Android-based device, it was only natural to integrate with Google Assistant,' Chris Daniel, Product Director for Shield TV, told HCC. The Google platform on Shield comes in handy in a number of ways, like when you're watching a movie and want to dim the lights, he says. 'You'll be able to shop, order food or call an Uber.'

In a move that enhances its smart hub role, Nvidia has also taken the wraps off the Nvidia Spot, an AI microphone accessory that extends the use of the Shield platform through the house.

Google Assistant can dramatically enhance the TV experience, promises Daniel. 'It can search apps on Shield and control media with voice commands; you can tell it to "play *Game of Thrones*," and because you get an enhanced visual response to your questions, if you ask 'who plays Daenerys Targaryen?' you'll discover that Emilia Clarke was also Sarah Connor in *Terminator Genisys*.



Chris Daniel: 'We think the Shield can replace the Blu-ray player, smart speaker and more in your living room'

'This level of visual context also means that when you ask how your favourite team is doing, you'll get the latest score, plus league tables, onscreen.'

Let's (not) get physical

It's all part of a wide-ranging change to the home technology landscape, he says. Daniel even goes so far as to suggest that the days of physical media are well and truly numbered. 'Streaming just makes entertainment easier and faster to access. We expect customers to continue to make the transition from physical media to streaming – and Shield users can expect the same quality: Ultra HD resolution, HDR visuals and Dolby Atmos sound. We're seeing a growth in 'skinny' OTT bundles like Now TV, as well as standalone apps like Netflix and Amazon Video.'

Daniel says that the trend for home entertainment is clearly streaming. 'It's à la carte TV, variety at your fingertips. We're in the midst of appification in the living room.'

Similar to how your smartphone replaced a camera, a flashlight, an MP3 player and various other devices; we think the Shield can replace the set top box, blu-ray player, smart speaker and more in your living room.'

Nvidia's Android-based super streamer is getting AI smarts



Optoma 4K PJ range grows up

Laser-based UHZ65 becomes projector maker's new flagship

Proudly revelling in its status as the leading 4K projector brand in the EMEA region (according to recent market research), Optoma is hoping a new UHD beamer can help it stay there – the range-topping UHZ65.

This jettisons the traditional lamp source in favour of an on-trend laser, which it says boosts life-span (to 20,000 hours), colour performance, contrast, brightness and boot-up speed.

As on the brand's lamp-based UHD65, a 1.6x zoom ensures a throw ratio of 1.39-2.22:1, while vertical image shifting is offered to align images with your screen. Connections include dual HDMI


inputs, a 12V trigger, and a USB-A power for media player charging. PureMotion frame interpolation aims to smooth bigscreen visuals.

Other specs show a laser-adjusted boost, however. Brightness is now rated at 3,000 Lumens, while claimed contrast has soared to 2,000,000:1.

The UHZ65 is available now priced at £5,000. www.optoma.co.uk

Like the UHD65, the UHZ65 comes in a cinema-room friendly black chassis





Now with more depth
and more clarity

WHAT HI-FI?
AWARDS 2017

Stereo speakers
Best standmount speaker £400-£800
KEF Q350

The new Q Series hi-fi speakers

The eighth iteration of this successful range continues to be centred on KEF's legendary Uni-Q driver array, and is now enhanced with a new system design, beefier low-frequency drivers and a new damped tweeter loading tube. The result is superior bass performance and an even more detailed natural sound. Listen for yourself and experience pleasure in high resolution.

KEF.COM

KEF

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Extras...

Small items that could make a big impression...

Vault of Horror: The Italian Collection



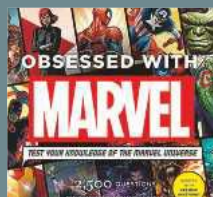
Say what you will about the likes of *Tentacles*, *Eaten Alive* and *Porno Holocaust*, but Italian horror films gave audiences some of the funkier soundtracks to ever grace the inside of a cinema. Behind a superb new piece of sleeve art by genre artist Graham Humphreys, Demon Music's unmissable double 180g vinyl (plus bonus CD) album features 20 tracks from the likes of Stelvio Cipriani, Fabio Frizzi and Ennio Morricone.

Monty Python FAQ



Another very welcome addition to Applause Theatre & Cinema Books' FAQ range. This in-depth £18 tome not only gives fans a considered look at the TV series, films and reunion performances, but also recalls the comedy troupe's smallscreen precursors and charts the subsequent careers of messrs Cleese, Chapman, Idle, Gilliam, Palin and Jones.

Obsessed with Marvel



Consider yourself an expert on the Marvel universe? Then test your knowledge with this updated version of Titan Books' Marvel quiz book, which packs its 320 pages with 2,500 boggling questions (including 300 brand-new ones) split across nine categories ranging from the obvious ('Fantastic Four' and 'Spider-Man') to the more obscure ('Horror Heroes' and 'Marvel Time'). If you fancy the challenge you can pick up a copy priced around £18.

Better audio for everyone

Hi-res audio no longer the exclusive domain of audiophiles, say experts

Will 2018 be the year that hi-res audio finally becomes ubiquitous? After an almost insidious shift to 24-bit sonics, hardware incompatibility is now more noteworthy than its inclusion.

'It isn't quite mainstream yet – when it is, people won't be talking about it any more, just like they don't shout about 1080p TVs these days – but it isn't far off,' suggests John Steward, content director at Dynaudio. 'I think the really important thing is that listeners are now far more open to listening to hi-res because of its easy availability through services like Tidal and Qobuz,' he says. 'It's no longer the exclusive domain of audiophiles, hard-to-configure music servers and difficult-to-access download stores.'

One increasingly influential factor is MQA (Master Quality Authenticated), the versatile (and backwards-compatible) file format. The recently launched LG V30 smartphone, NW-ZX300 Sony Walkman and iFi iDSD Black Label portable DAC and headphone amp (to name just three), all support the technology – and MQA says it has more announcements coming at CES in January.

'More streaming services, like Deezer, are set to follow Tidal in offering studio-quality sound, so awareness and adoption is certainly gaining momentum,' Mike Jbara, CEO of MQA, told HCC. 'The challenge remains to make hi-res convenient and easy for consumers and that's a message best delivered by the music services and artists people trust.'

Certainly, the technology seems to be garnering support within major record labels, who see clear value in remastering content in MQA for the physical media market.

Hot on the heels of the *Black Sabbath*:

Ten Year War MQA boxset, comes the Gary Moore: *Blues and Beyond* collection, which includes MQA encodes of previously unreleased live material, alongside remastered vinyl and CD.

'Home is the centre'

Increasingly, the adoption of hi-res audio is also being driven by 'smart' technology. Cyrus Audio is the latest stalwart to jump onboard. It's now packaging its £700 Cyrus



Mike Jbara: 'Making hi-res convenient and easy for consumers is a message best delivered by artists people trust'

One amplifier with a Chromecast Audio dongle and three-month subscription to Tidal's premium Hi-Fi streaming service.

'It used to be the case that music streaming services were rejected by traditional audiophiles due to their inherent loss of quality, but with lossless services and the possibility to integrate these into affordable, high-quality consumer products, we're on the verge of a listening revolution,' says MD Simon Freethy.

'We expect buyers to increase their spending to improve convenience in the home,' comments Jbara. 'The trend for remote working and the recognition that people can be more productive if they don't commute, combined with better work/life balance, is one dimension of the "Home is the centre" philosophy that's driving so many smart products and related opportunities.'

'Visions of a Star Trek future'

For all of this, though, we can't help wonder if there is a danger that over-hyped smart home integration could end up under-delivering where casual consumers are concerned.

Possibly, admits John Steward. 'But that's only because it isn't mature yet. We've all got visions of a *Star Trek* future where we can have conversations with our voice-controlled devices in simple language, and not have to bark specific commands in a specific order to get them to work.'

'What we're seeing now are wireless speakers becoming more intelligent and autonomous,' he adds. 'They'll adapt to listening preferences and lifestyle, changing their performance based on their owners' mood and where they've been placed. The key is simplicity – there'll be a ton of complex tech churning

away under the hood, but on the surface it'll be all about a seamless user experience. And with AirPlay 2 entering the mix, users will soon be able to mix-and-match for really personalised entertainment systems.'



Listen to your Gary Moore MQA files via a Sony Walkman (top) or Cyrus Audio amplifier (bottom)

This month's top 10 news stories in handy, bite-sized chunks...



1 Dinky Dolby Atmos system

Damson Global has launched what it claims is not only the 'most advanced wireless speaker system' to date, but also 'the most affordable Dolby Atmos-enabled home cinema system'. Priced just £700, Damson's compact S-Series system is powered by its JetStreamNet wireless network and consists of the S-Bar soundbar, the S-Woofer sub, two S-Cube wireless speakers to handle rear channels, and a dedicated upfiring S-Atmos module that docks on top of the S-Bar.

2 Sony finds its voice

Selected Sony Android-powered 4K HDR Bravia TVs (XD and ZD9 2016 sets, XE and A1 2017 sets) can now be controlled using Amazon Alexa-enabled devices following a recent firmware release. Voice control functions include activating the TV power, volume, play/pause/stop/fast forward controls, switching inputs and changing channels.

3 Games boost physical media

The latest quarterly figures from consumer research specialist Kantar Worldpanel claims that physical entertainment sales in the UK grew by 2.2 per cent, although this came primarily from games, with the video and music categories still falling by 4.8 and 5.4 per cent respectively...

4 Blu-ray sales on the up

It's not all bad news, though. The same data also shows that Blu-ray sales continue to grow on these shores, with the format gaining 15,000 new shoppers during the three months up to October. Meanwhile, HMV has now overtaken Amazon to become the UK's leading seller of physical video with 22.5 per cent of the market.

5 Sky Store feeling Blu

Sky Store has revised its Buy & Keep service and is now offering customers the choice of either a DVD or Blu-ray physical copy with their Digital HD movie purchases. Prices start at £14 for a Digital HD copy with a DVD and £17 for the Digital HD and Blu-ray bundle.

6 Power up for Xmas!

Got a spare £30,000 tucked down the back of the couch? If so, then you could always pick up a pair of McIntosh's most powerful single-chassis monoblock amps to date. The MC1.2KW Quad Balanced Power Amplifier weighs a whopping 71kg and claims to pump 1,200W of pure power into a single channel. Blimey!

7 Vestel has plenty of Vision

Vestel has revealed that it will be supporting Dolby Vision across its entire range of Ultra HD TVs, including its new line of OLED flatscreens. 'We recognise that Dolby is leading the way when it comes to creating state-of-the-art image and viewing experiences,' states Vestel bigwig Hakan Kutlu.

8 Horrible hits

According to figures released by the Official Charts Company, *I Am Legend* is the UK's bestselling horror title of all time on DVD and Blu-ray, having shifted 2.35m units in total. *Shaun of the Dead* was a close second with 2.27m units sold and *Van Helsing* was third with sales of 1.72m. *Cloverfield* came fourth and the *Alien Quadrilogy* was fifth on the frightful list.

9 Sainsbury's makes records

Not content with selling albums on vinyl, Sainsbury's has joined forces with Universal and Warner Music to set up its very own label that will put out exclusive records only for sale in its stores. The first two albums will be compilations curated by Saint Etienne's Bob Stanley.

10 Restored *Tails* coming

Arrow Video has announced the third in its series of Dario Argento Blu-ray reissues. The new *Cat O' Nine Tails* BD arrives on January 8 and is based on a new 4K restoration of the original camera negatives. The limited edition set also houses a double-sided poster and four reproduction lobby cards, while the Blu-ray itself offers up new interviews, script pages for the lost original ending, and a chat-track by genre experts Kim Newman and Alan Jones.



Premiere...

What's happening in the world of TV and films...

From Marvel to DC



Chuck star Zachary Levi is jumping ship from Marvel to DC. Having played the Asgardian Fandral in Marvel's *Thor* sequels, Levi has now snagged the lead in DC's superhero flick *Shazam!*. David F. Sandberg (who scared up sizeable box office returns with horror hit *Annabelle: Creation* – see p95) directs the film, which will hit cinemas in 2019.

Girls can be bad, too!

The *Bad Boys* franchise may have stalled on the bigscreen, but that hasn't stopped NBC from ordering a pilot to a potential spin-off TV series that will follow Gabrielle Union's Syd Burnett (the sister of Martin Lawrence's character in the films), who has left her past behind and works for the LAPD.

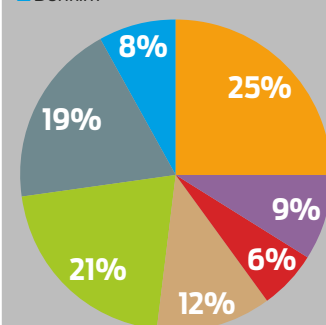
Lin revs up for more

Vin Diesel has revealed that director Justin Lin will be returning to the *Fast & Furious* franchise to helm the ninth and tenth instalments. Actress Jordana Brewster will also make a comeback in the next film.

We asked...

What is Christopher Nolan's best movie?

■ Memento ■ Insomnia
■ Batman Begins ■ The Prestige
■ The Dark Knight ■ Interstellar
■ Dunkirk



Results from www.homecinemachoice.com
Go online for more polling action

Beach boys

Dunkirk → Warner Bros. →
DVD/Blu-ray/Ultra HD Blu-ray



One of the year's biggest blockbusters makes its disc debut on December 18, and there's one version that Christopher Nolan is especially thrilled about – 4K HDR. 'The film was shot entirely on the highest-definition IMAX and 65mm film and this fantastic new format is able to maximise *Dunkirk's* impact in the home,' enthuses the director. As well as the UHD platter, the 4K HDR release will also be available from digital platforms; DVD and Blu-ray iterations (including the one bundled with the UHD disc) will play host to 16 behind-the-scenes featurettes.





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Face to Face

Topics of discussion on the HCC Facebook page

On movies to give your subwoofer a workout...



John Wick or Power Rangers.
Del Palmer

All of 'em. My neighbours hate me!
Mark Hevingham

For me the heavy hitters are:
Incredible Hulk, *War of the Worlds*,
Cloverfield and *How to Train Your Dragon*. It's the stuff that digs below 20Hz that gets me going!
Amar Dhillon

Top Gun – the planes taking off after the opening credits.
Fred Yelp

What you're watching on your home cinema...



The Fifth Element on my new Atmos system in its 6.1.4 glory!
Fondriest Steve

This weekend it's Season 4 and 5 of *Grimm*! Might have bitten off more than I can chew...

Robert Corrigan

I got the *Spider-Man Legacy Boxset* and it's the best put-together set I own, so well thought-out. The picture quality of the Raimi trilogy isn't super great but it's a nice step up from the Blu-rays.

Stewart Heed

Despicable Me 3 4K Blu-ray. Really enjoyed it. Way better than *DM2*!
Jonny Roman

Just finished *The Thing* from Arrow. The best version to date.
Rich Griffiths

The Haunting (1963). A real treat, as the picture was a massive improvement over the original DVD. I'm a little disappointed with the 2.1 audio as I think this film needed 5.1 sound to match the scary scenes.

Steve Michael Clark



Join in the fun

Like our page at facebook.com/HomeCinemaChoice

Back of the 'net

Trailers, technology and more to check out on the web



Knock knock...

Helen Mirren stars as the black-clothed matriarch in this haunted house horror due to spook up cinemas from March 2. It claims to be 'inspired by actual events', telling the tale of heiress Sarah Winchester and the construction of her 500-room, seven-story mansion. The ghosts are probably made up, though...
youtu.be/vseYaPR6hgl



The car's the star...

John Carpenter directs and stars in this music video for the *Christine* theme, re-released on the recent *Anthology... LP*. A chance for fans to see the classic Plymouth Fury roaming the streets once again, and to wonder what Carpenter might be capable of if he could get behind the camera for another feature film.
youtu.be/SH2f4A4SVNk



Vrooom vrooom

The second season of *The Grand Tour*, featuring Jeremy Clarkson, Richard Hammond and The Other One, will be available exclusively to Amazon Prime Video subscribers (in 4K) from December 8, with episodes released weekly. In preparation, Amazon has cut this James Bond-spoofing teaser...
youtu.be/v_NRS0VncJQ



KEF recrafts Kube

KEF's new three-model Kube subwoofer range (featuring 8in, 10in and 12in versions) has been announced, with prices starting at £500. Full specs and details are available from the KEF website – turn to p42 for our review of a Q series system with Kube10b woofer.

uk.kef.com/kube12b-kube10b-kube8b-subwoofers

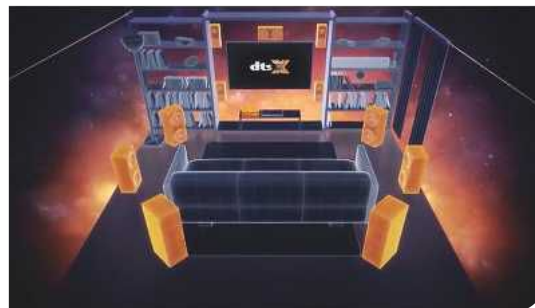


TOP PICK

Sci-fi destruction

Alex Garland's flick *Ex Machina* was a masterful slice of sci-fi suspense, and Paramount's teaser trailer for his February 2018 film *Annihilation* suggests we could be in for more of the same. We haven't a clue what's going on here (having not read the source novel), but it looks intriguing.

youtu.be/uFaDurSCKOk



Sound all around

Originally announced this Summer, DTS's Virtual X post-processing trickery (which aims to add a sense of height and extra immersion to sources using a traditional 'flat' speaker array) should be arriving about now via firmware to some AVRs and soundbars. Check out DTS's vid for more info.
youtu.be/BVqGmpofMXO

11-channel box of tricks

Marantz SR8012 → www.marantz.co.uk



Marantz is joining stablemate Denon (see p46) in releasing an 11-channel AVR. The SR8012, the company's new flagship, hits retailers this December priced at £2,700 and supports 7.1.4 Dolby Atmos and DTS:X – plus Auro3D out of the box. A claimed 205W is delivered to each of its 11 channels via monolithic amp modules, an 'oversized power supply', and custom-built toroidal transformer. Room EQ is handled by Audyssey, processing by SHARC DSPs and features include HEOS multiroom, 4K HDR passthrough and much, much more.

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Make sure you get the right Christmas gifts by buying them for yourself. **Team HCC** draws up a system-boosting wishlist of AV accessories, movie memorabilia, software, books and more

UHD BD BOXSETS

Kick-start your 4K Blu-ray collection with these new bundles, p22



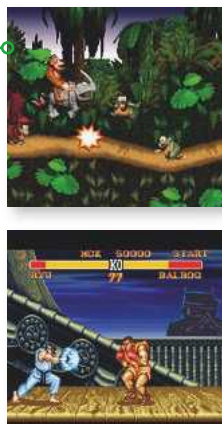
Alphason Element XL

Specialist brand Alphason Designs has a focus on AV furniture products that cater to enthusiasts, and its Element XL typifies its approach – accommodation for your amp thanks to roomier shelf-space over the standard Element line, soft-touch doors, IR-friendly glass panels and locking castors for easy manoeuvre join with a rugged construction that makes it suitable for 50kg loads. The standard Element XL cabinet (£350) measures 1,250mm wide; two can be fixed together to house a supersize flatscreen. Available in black, grey or white. www.alphasondesigns.com

Nintendo Classic Mini SNES

With new consoles hitting upwards of £400 and games selling for more than a bundle of Blu-rays, getting a joypad fix can be an expensive business. Enter Nintendo's retro-tastic SNES reboot – £80 gets you a shrunken, HDMI-equipped iteration of the classic '90s console, plus two controllers, and the hardware is pre-loaded with 21 fan-favourite titles in all their 16-bit glory, including *Super Mario Kart*, *Donkey Kong*, *Final Fantasy III*, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*, *Street Fighter II* and *Star Fox* – the latter even coming with a never-before-released sequel. Be warned that since its debut in the Autumn, the Classic Mini SNES has been selling out as soon as stock arrives. Happy hunting...

www.nintendo.co.uk





Front Row Serenity

Movie-watching in comfort is the promise of Front Row's Serenity range of motorised cinema chairs with control over seat recline, foot and headrest. Finish options include real leather and coloured fabrics. Cupholders and USB charging ports are fitted as standard – accessories include rotating trays. The modular design enables straight and curved configs to be established, or you could just opt for one and let others scramble around for a beanbag. Pricing starts at £1,250.

www.kenthomecinema.co.uk



Little Bits Droid Inventor Kit

This officially approved R2-D2 replica (12in high) would make a good fit on the shelf in a *Star Wars*-themed cinema den, but as part of the Little Bits family there's more to it than that. Aimed at junior engineers (or big kids), this £99 astromech droid requires self-assembly and, thanks to its core parts, can be easily customised – ideal if you fancy building your own GNK power bot instead. App control lets you take R2 for a spin, or it can run in Self Nav mode (with a proximity sensor avoiding any potential Sarlacc teeth). It can even be steered using the Force...

shop.littlebits.cc

Nanoleaf Ivy Smarter Kit

Voice activation and app control are part of the package with this £120 smart lighting kit which bundles the Nanoleaf Ivy wireless hub with a pair of dodecahedron-styled E27 LED lightbulbs. Compatible control options include Android and iOS devices, plus Amazon's Alexa, and features include light groupings and scene settings. The hub can support up to 50 bulbs.

www.nanoleaf.me



Dynaudio Music 7

The top model in Dynaudio's recently launched (and rather stylish) multiroom speaker range has a welcome bonus feature – an HDMI ARC input (plus optical digital audio) providing a connection to your flatscreen TV. You could therefore switch from using the Music 7 for streaming audio fun to hooking up to a second-room TV for improved sonics. As with all models in the range, the Music 7 offers RoomAdapt and NoiseAdapt auto sound optimisation and app control; here, however, the driver complement extends to dual 5in woofers, dual 3in midrange units and a pair of 1in tweeters. Pricing is £1,000 approx.

www.dynaudio.com



Yamaha WX-AD10

We're big fans of Yamaha's streaming gizmo, as it allows all the integrated services (Spotify, Tidal, net radio, etc) incorporated into the company's MusicCast multiroom platform to be added to traditional dumb gear – just connect the WX-AD10 to a line input and you're in business. Also standing in its favour is the compact form, which lets you install it and forget about it, and the £150 price tag. Feature set extends if other MusicCast gear is in your system, but this has standalone appeal, too. uk.yamaha.com

Canton DM5

The £300 DM5 offers the same aesthetic as Canton's previous DM9 soundbar, only scaled down to suit smaller setups (it's 550mm wide). Hookups are aptX Bluetooth, optical and coaxial, feeding a quartet of full-range drivers and two auxiliary bass units tied to a claimed 120W of grunt. A trio of EQ presets, plus bass and treble tweaks, give user control over sound performance. www.richersounds.com



KEF LS50 Wireless Nocturne

Since first launching, KEF's LS50 hi-res-capable active speakers have gone through wired and wireless iterations – now they're available in a special edition (wireless) version with styling from 'internationally-renown' designer Marcel Wanders. Dubbed Nocturne, the patterned baffle (and UniQ driver) includes elements that glow in the dark. 'The design possesses a distinctive rhythm all on its own,' suggests Wanders – we actually think the effect is strangely reminiscent of the visual feel of the *Alien* franchise. As always with the LS50s, these aren't cheap – £2,300 per pair – but they sound fantastic. www.kef.com/gb

Ultra HD boxsets...



Spider-Man Legacy Boxset

Sam Raimi's blockbuster *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2005 and 2007), plus the two *Amazing Spider-Man* reboot movies (2012, 2014) are collected together in this bumper Ultra HD release. While the £120 price tag may set your Spidey-sense tingling, the package here contains new featurettes, the *Spider-Man* 2.1 edit, plus a new cut of *Spider-Man* 3, spread over 12 discs.



Transformers: 5-Movie Collection

Transformers: The Last Knight, the most recent robot-filled AV spectacular from Michael Bay, crowns this multi-platter 4K set from Paramount Pictures, joined by *Age of Extinction*, *Dark of the Moon*, *Revenge of the Fallen* and the 2007 original making their UHD debuts – with new Atmos mixes for the first three. Get it for £80.



4K Ultra HD: 4-Film Collection

Another UHD Blu-ray 'starter pack' from 20th Century Fox, seemingly a bit random but priced at around £60. The quartet of movies here is the Ridley Scott/Matt Damon sci-fi *The Martian* and Scott's *Alien* prequel *Prometheus*; madcap gaming adaptation *Assassin's Creed* and comic book caper *Kingsman: The Secret Service*.



Harry Potter: 8-Film Collection

We were left feeling like Muggles by Warner's 4K release strategy for its much loved *Harry Potter* franchise – the studio began by outing the final four films in the series (rather than the first four) on standalone UHD discs, and then... stopped. Now, though, all eight films have been given a 4K HDR do-over, and bundled into a £90 eight-disc boxset. That's your Boxing Day marathon sorted.

Sony LSPX-S1 Glass Sound Speaker

Part of Sony's Life Space range of tech-meets-design kit, this see-thru speaker doubles as a candlelight-style lamp, courtesy of a dimmable LED filament. A 360-degree soundfield is delivered by the LSPX-S1's glass tube tweeter and 2in bass driver squirrelled away in its plinth. Battery or mains powered, it accepts Bluetooth audio as well as sources hooked up to its minijack input. It's priced at £800, so don't drop it... www.sony.co.uk



Focal Listen Wireless

While Focal is known for its high-price loudspeakers and premium headphones, its Listen series targets buyers on pared-down budgets. This wireless iteration (£200) features closed-back cans with memory-foam ear-cushions encapsulating 40mm titanium/mylar drivers, and supports Bluetooth transmission with a battery life of around 20 hours. A supplied minijack cable handles passive use. www.focal.com/uk



McIntosh MHA50

US audio specialist McIntosh has entered the competitive arena of portable DAC/headphones amps with its £900 MHA50. Just small enough to fit in your pocket, it claims a 200mW power output for 8-600 ohm headphones, wireless and USB connections for sourced devices, and employs a 32-bit DAC for hi-res file decoding. Battery life is rated at around six hours in wireless mode. Styling is as gorgeous as you'd expect from the brand. www.jordanacoustics.co.uk

Stocking up

Don't want to splash out? Get these for under £20

NextUp Comedy

Available through Amazon Prime's 'Channels' platform, NextUp is a rolling monthly-subscription VOD service focused on belly-laughs. £3.50/pm gets you access to standup specials featuring the likes of Richard Herring and Stewart Francis. NextUpComedy.com

Look-ALites



Fancy an LED lamp styled like a cartoon version of your favourite Marvel or DC superhero or *Star Wars* icon for £20?

Then the battery-powered/USB cable-connecting Look-ALites range is for you.

www.groovyuk.com

Popcorn cups

Your cinema room doesn't have it all until you're munching snacks from a multiplex-style container, so perhaps stock up on some 130oz 'retro' popcorn buckets at £8 for a pack of six. They're said to be disposable, but we won't judge if you want to reuse them. www.drinkstuff.com

& back-catalogue BDs...



Three Films by Ken Loach (1991-1994)

The BFI has followed its mammoth Alan Clarke boxset with a smaller offering (available for £35) housing three of director Ken Loach's early '90s dramas – *Riff-Raff*, *Raining Stones* and *Ladybird Ladybird*. Each title is accompanied by an illustrated booklet, while extras include retrospective documentaries and trailers.



Iconic Moments Film Collection

Aiming for a Criterion Collection vibe, Warner Bros's Iconic Moments Collection of DVD/Blu-ray re-releases offers classic flicks in a numbered series with new sleeve art, and at bargain prices. A second slate of 17 titles hit stores recently (including *Citizen Kane*, *Ben-Hur*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Point Break* and *Gravity*), with prices at £5 for DVD and £8 for Blu-ray (where offered).



Buster Keaton: 3 Films

Brand-new 4K restorations of three groundbreaking Buster Keaton silent comedies – *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), *The General* (1926) and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928) – take pride of place in this new addition to Eureka's Masters of Cinema Blu-ray lineup. Limited to just 3,000 copies, the three-disc set also serves up plenty of new and archival bonus goodies for each film, as well as a 60-page booklet.



Melville: The Essential Collection

Following on from previous Blu-ray boxsets devoted to Jean-Luc Godard and Luis Buñuel, StudioCanal's latest Essential Collection release bundles together six films by celebrated French filmmaker Jean-Pierre Melville. As well as exclusive extras, the boxset features new 4K restorations of three of his films – *Bob Le Flambeur* (1956), *Léon Morin, Prêtre* (1961) and *Le Doulos* (1963).

1: Ultimate LEGO Star Wars

Packed with hundreds of photos, this look at every single LEGO Star Wars set and minifigure released over the past two decades is an indispensable guide for collectors of all ages.

2: Star Trek Beyond: The Makeup Artistry of Joel Harlow

This gorgeous hardback celebrates the work done by make-up artist Joel Harlow and his team in creating more than 50 new alien races for the 2016 blockbuster sci-fi sequel *Star Trek Beyond*.

3: Movie Geek: The Den of Geek! Guide to the Movieverse

This first book from the popular film and TV website offers an informed yet irreverent look at the movie business, from where a film's budget is spent to the 'dark art' of movie poster quotes.

4: Close Encounters of the Third Kind: The Ultimate Visual History

Providing an in-depth account of the making of Spielberg's 1977

masterpiece, this hardback is brilliant reading once you've finished with the recent 4K release.

5: The Art of Horror Movies

Celebrate the evolution of the horror genre with this beautifully

illustrated collection of over 600 rare and unique images, ranging from posters and adverts to tie-in book covers and original artwork inspired by classic movies.

6: Justice League: The Ultimate Guide

You've seen the film, now learn everything there is to know about

the Justice League's comic book counterparts, their adventures, and foes, in this 200-page guide.

7: Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Official Grimoire

Here's one for any wannabe Wiccans or potential slayers – a guide to the history and lore of magic as told by Buffy's witchy chum Willow Rosenberg.

Extras...



Game of Thrones: The Hound's Helm

Fans of the HBO fantasy series will want to clear some space on their mantelpiece for this replica of the Hound's iconic helmet. Priced £350 and limited to just 2,500 pieces, this officially licensed collectible is made from fibreglass and has operable jaws. The helm also comes with a certificate of authenticity and a silkscreened wood display stand. www.hbostore.co.uk



Numskull Designs Christmas Jumpers

Wondering how to show off your film fan credentials in a festive style? Numskull has an extensive range of licensed movie and videogame-related knitted jumpers, ranging from *Deadpool* to 'Merry Sithmas'. Prices start at £35. www.numskull.co.uk



Justice League Movie: Wonder Woman ARTFX+

Invite Gal Gadot, or at least a 1/10th scale replica of her, into your home with this hyper-detailed addition to Kotobukiya's range of ARTFX+ PVC statues based on the *Justice League* film. Wonder Woman – or any of the other Justice League ARTFX+ statues – can be yours for around £75. www.kotoeu.com



The LEGO Batman Movie: The Joker Manor

The Joker has given Bruce Wayne's stately home a manic makeover in this mammoth 3,435-piece set based on the climax to *The LEGO Batman Movie*. Priced £250, The Joker Manor stands over 55cm tall and 66cm wide and includes a cinema room among its many brick-built locations. The set also comes with 10 minifigures, so you can act out your own sequel. www.lego.com/en-gb



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JAILHOUSE SHOCK!

*Martin Dew chats to
Brawl in Cell Block 99 writer/director
S. Craig Zahler about casting Vince Vaughn,
comedic violence and Alfred Hitchcock*

S. CRAIG ZAHLER, the writer/director of incoming action thriller *Brawl in Cell Block 99*, isn't the typical Hollywood creative. His career so far spans novel writing, screenplays, cinematography, soundtrack composition and heavy metal music. Yet following the success of his debut movie *Bone Tomahawk* in 2015 (the Kurt Russell-starring horror Western), Zahler looks set to remain behind the camera.

Like his first film, *Brawl in Cell Block 99* showcases his talent for crafting an original story and pushing it to its limits, and anyone used to seeing leading man Vince Vaughn in comedies such as *Dodgeball*, *Wedding Crashers* and *Fred Claus* will be in for a shock...

Congratulations – *Brawl in Cell Block 99* has created a huge buzz on the festival circuit...

Thank you. I come from the place of there are two things I'm really looking for when I make a piece. One is that I like it myself, and two, that it leads to the next one. So, kind of, everything else is gravy for me. Some of that gravy is richer than other parts of it, but it's been really enjoyable, and the critical reception thus far has really exceeded what I expected to get. There are a lot of things that can provoke people in this movie, and people seem to land on the right side of it in almost all cases, and it's gratifying. It's gratifying in a way that this is the piece I want to make, and it's out there.

You manage to create a palpable sense of tension in the film, and like to manipulate the audience...

For sure. In terms of crafting most of that stuff, I think some if it is because I'm not in a rush to get there, obviously. I've two 132-minute movies out there and these are both a lot shorter than my next one will be. I'm just really interested in all those little character moments, and the atmosphere and details, and all of that stuff that if all you wanted to do was have a movie where dudes are busting heads for 90 minutes, you're not spending the time to do that. You'll also care less about the characters and their journey if you do that. But if you're feeling that tension with the characters in the right way, then the world has been built in the right way – rather than just telegraphing where everything is going, and shuttling through from action moment to action moment.

There's a lot of violence, but you look at it with tongue firmly lodged in cheek. It's darkly comic...

It's interesting. In terms of it being darkly comic, the violence in this one compared to *Bone Tomahawk* is very different. I remember Mel Gibson watched it when we were prepping *Dragged Across Concrete* [Zahler's next movie, due 2018] and I could tell from talking to him that he laughed at some stuff. And it's a question of whether you should laugh at these things or not, because some of it's extremely violent, and it lands in a different place, and the intention's different. For the most part – and speaking in broad strokes – the violence in *Bone Tomahawk* is supposed to be traumatic. You are with the people

Zahler on Vince Vaughn: 'The subtlety of what he's doing is incredible...'



S. Craig Zahler: 'I'm really interested in all those little character moments, and the atmosphere and details...'

that it's happening to, and you realise these guys are in way over their heads, and how bad is this going to get? So it hits you that way. Whereas, in *Brawl in Cell Block 99*, the person with a capacity for more violence than any other is Bradley Thomas, wonderfully played by Vince Vaughn. Barrelling through this movie, and dealing with all this anger that's within him... when it starts coming out there is a joy, or potentially a cathartic experience for the viewer, because this dude has just been whipped, and had bricks put on his back, and been beaten down for so long.

You know what he's capable of doing from the third scene in the movie with the *pas-de-deux* with him and his wife's car. You know what he's capable of there. Watching this guy restrain himself in so many situations, but then for it to finally come out, there's some joy in it. But as vicious as it gets, there's a nastiness that is a little comedic.

How did you choose Vince Vaughn for Bradley, and were you intentionally casting against type?

The answers to both those questions are interconnected. When I conceived the piece initially, I wasn't thinking of an actor. And then you go around in the process of writing, which is one thing, and then after you're done with it, you look at what you have. In the case of this piece, which I wrote immediately before *Bone Tomahawk*, it went away, and there was a version that was going to happen with another actor who had kind of helped getting it made, and it didn't happen.

I wasn't in control at that point, I was just writing screenplay after screenplay, selling them, making albums and writing novels. It got to a point where I made *Bone Tomahawk* and I knew I wanted to do something right away, and the producers Dallas Sonnier and Jack Heller got [*Brawl in Cell Block 99*] back. So then I had it back, and at this point in my career – I'd made *Bone Tomahawk* – I wanted an interesting choice.

In terms of casting against type or not, there's a little bit of this idea of 'If I put someone in who might typically do a movie like this...' Say I was making this in the '80s, and gave it to Schwarzenegger or Stallone >



Vaughn will join Zahler (and Mel Gibson) for next year's police thriller *Dragged Across Concrete*

to do. Then this would become a Stallone or Schwarzenegger movie, in which they're playing this badass. Different from John Rambo or Rocky Balboa... but still sort of part of that person's catalogue of badasses. In the case of *Brawl in Cell Block 99*, picking an unlikely person for the part is something that makes it unique to this movie. Picking Vince Vaughn, and having him transform himself the way he did, with the shaved head, the tattoo, getting more muscular, and showing facets of him that he has, as someone with experience of competitive wrestling in high school and boxing – all of this combines to make a character that is unique to this movie.

He might go on and make other movies like this, and this would be the first one. I always knew it would be a talking point. You know, holy s**t, look at Vince

Vaughn in this thing! He is phenomenal. Just the dramatic performance and the subtlety of what he's doing is incredible, but then showing this whole other side of how he can weaponise himself, with all the tender grace notes of performance. It's just terrific. I was a fan of his and knew he was capable, but didn't know how great he was, and how far he could go.

Are you an actor's director? Do you get involved in the process?

Very much so. To me, the job of a director is to act. Perhaps I shouldn't insult Alfred Hitchcock while I'm in London, but I think there's a larger misconception from his days that what a director should do is come up with excessively clever camera stuff, and all this stuff that calls attention to it being a movie. There

Under lock and key From sci-fi to comedy to serious drama, Hollywood loves a prison flick



Cool Hand Luke

Paul Newman twinkles his blue eyes and doesn't let Strother Martin's warden get him down in this pitch-perfect, award-winning 1967 prison drama that runs the gamut from meditation on the human spirit to how many boiled eggs it's possible to eat in one sitting. Altogether now: 'What we've got here is failure to communicate...'



Stir Crazy

One of four movies that saw Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor team up, 1980's *Stir Crazy* (directed by Sidney Poitier) is a blissful 110-minute comedy that uses its prison break plot as a springboard for silly gags and one-liners. Sample dialogue [after being sentenced to 120 years in jail]: 'Oh God! I'll be 161 when I get out...'



Prison

Behind the utterly generic title lurks a nifty 1987 fright flick about a reopened prison haunted by the malevolent spirit of a man sent to the electric chair 30 years earlier. As well as being Finnish director Renny Harlin's debut US feature, *Prison* also gave future *Lord of the Rings* star Viggo Mortensen one of his first major film roles.

are plenty of Hitchcock movies I like – it's not like I'm going to rip on the catalogue of his movies – but there are plenty I don't like. You watch something like *Rebecca*, and the performances are terrible, but there are other ones like *The Lady Vanishes*, which is really dry and funny, and it seems like he was probably in there more with the performers. And then you get something like *Rear Window*, which I think is terrific, and is probably my favourite movie of his. But Jimmy Stewart just did that, and he didn't really get in it.

Anyway, I bring up Hitchcock because he is the preeminent movie stylist, and the definitive director in the history of film for many people, but, to me, he brought the attention to cinematic tricks and elaborate camera movements, and an awareness of it being a movie, which is against what I want to do 100 per cent.

There's almost no score in this movie. All the camera movement is motivated by the characters. And my editor Greg D'Auria, I think, probably described my style the best, that it's an 'anti-style'. I wanted to disappear, and for you to just be in the room with the performers.

Benji Bakshi's cinematography is stunning...

We did *Bone Tomahawk* together, we did this together and then the movie I just wrapped we did together as well. I have a great relationship with him. I was a cinematographer myself, so certainly I could be seen as intrusively hands-on with that, but he's a terrific artist and has a great sense, no matter how much pressure's there.

A compliment he always gives to me is: 'There's one director who never says it's too dark,' meaning me. I'm comfortable with it because I used to shoot, and I know that letting some stuff drop off, or a lot of stuff drop off, can make it more compelling. So I'm rarely saying, 'bring in more fill light'.

It's terrific working with him. This is sort of a development of the style we shot *Bone Tomahawk* in, which is mostly handheld, but handheld to be as unnoticeable as possible when moving around with the characters. The third movie we've done is in a different style.



What cameras did you use?

We used the RED 'Weapon', which I thought was terrific, and I loved the way it handles the blacks, particularly if you look at the night stuff with the boat. It's rich and inky and the detail is there, and the noise is terrific. Whereas, we shot *Bone Tomahawk* on the RED 'Dragon', and I would not use that camera again... overall I like the look of that movie, but it was noisier than I would have liked.

***Bone Tomahawk*, Zahler's directorial debut, pitches Kurt Russell against cannibalistic troglodytes!**

Would you work with film?

I would. When I was a DP, I shot film exclusively. It would need to be the right piece. I have intentions to do another Western, and if I was doing another Western, that is to me a really good situation for it because it's a period piece, and I think it will give it an extra sense of antiquity. If I'm doing a contemporary, sharp, modern piece, I would be less interested in shooting film, but a period piece might do it.

Do you have a home cinema?

Nope. I live in revival houses. Almost all of the movies that I watch are on the bigscreen! ■

***Brawl in Cell Block 99* is out on Blu-ray and DVD on December 26, via Universal Pictures (UK).**



Alien³

For this 1992 three-quel, the *Alien* franchise traps its xenomorph within the confines of a penal colony crammed with violent male inmates. Sigourney Weaver's heroine Ripley also checks in (even shaving her head), clearing the path for plenty of gender-based friction, an alien dog, and blood-spattered terror.



The Shawshank Redemption

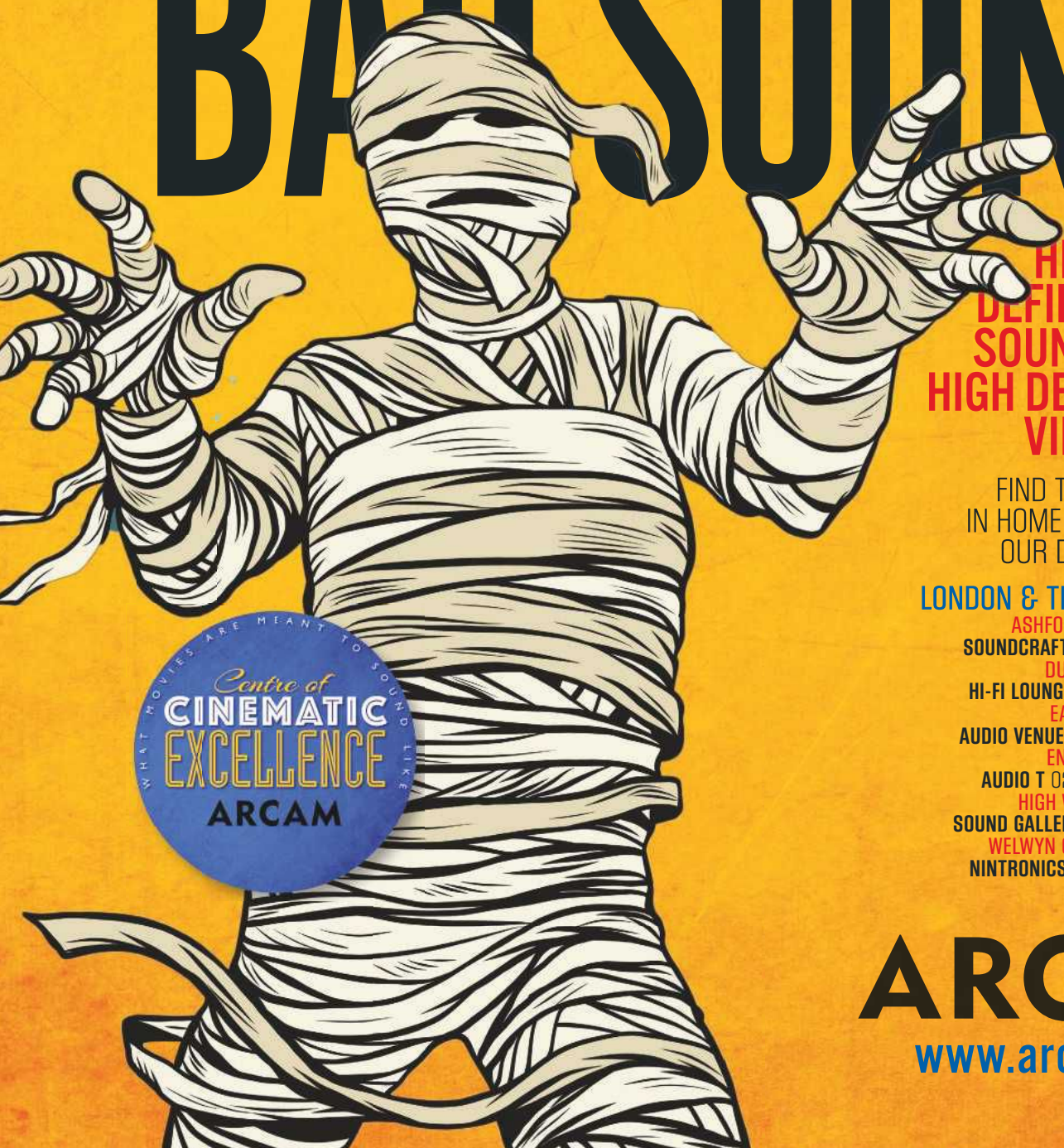
If you believe the IMDB, this 1994 flick is the most popular jailhouse caper of all time – and it's easy to see why. Frank Darabont faithfully adapts Stephen King's 1980s novella, with memorable performances from Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. If you don't go misty-eyed at the end, you may have a heart of stone.



Bronson

Based upon the story of real-life British prisoner Charles Bronson (born Michael Gordon Peterson), this fictionalised 2008 biography of the larger-than-life con proves the perfect match for director Nicolas Winding Refn's over-the-top stylistic flourishes, while Tom Hardy delivers the performance of his career in the lead role.

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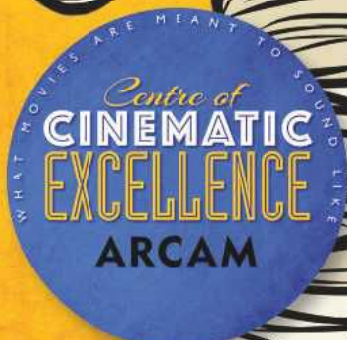
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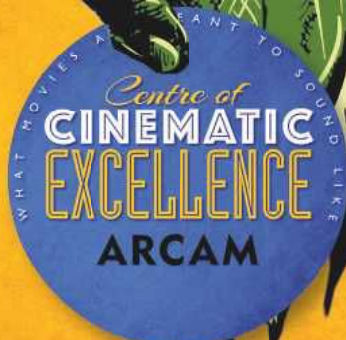
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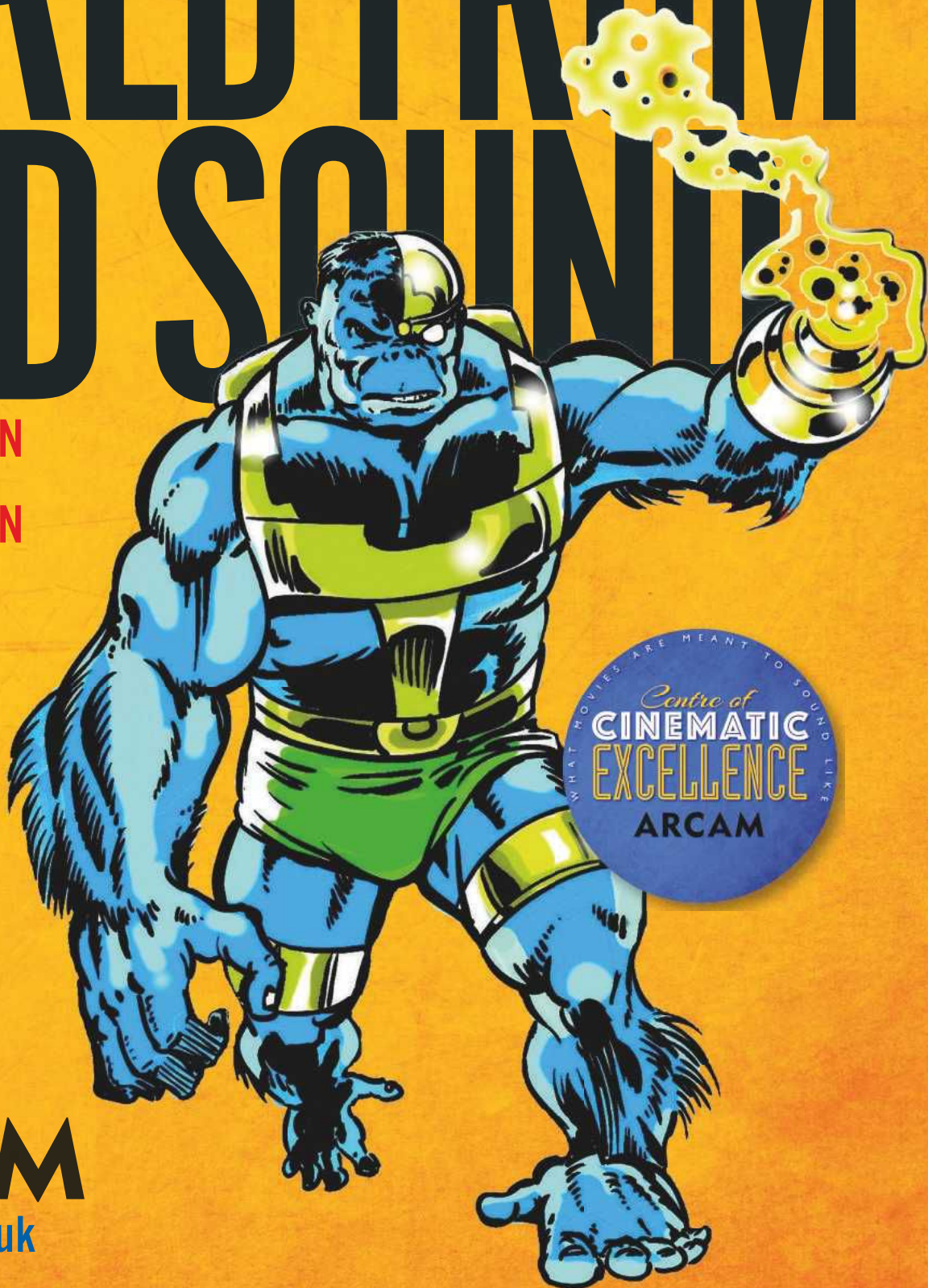
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Red room of pleasure

A

B

Neat design touches and state-of-the-art AV make this cinema room one to drool over...

A. Lighting the way

The cinema features various sources of illumination, including wall-mounted boxlights, downlighters in the ceiling soffit and a wraparound run of LED uplighting, all controlled via Rako integration

B. Colossal canvas

The 110in-wide projector screen (from Vutec) is 16:9 ratio, ideal for a room that mixes movie-watching with bigscreen console gaming

HERE'S A CUSTOM-DESIGNED cinema room where attention to detail and aesthetic flair combine with premium system hardware to create a room made for watching movies in style and comfort. Completed by Glasgow/Edinburgh-based installer Loud & Clear, it mixes a Dolby Atmos speaker array with 4K HDR projection, setting out its twin rows of seating (with space for seven) below a star ceiling canopy.



KIT CHECKLIST

SONY: VPL-VW320ES native 4K projector with HDR playback; PlayStation 4 console

VUTEC: 110in-wide 16:9 ratio Vutec Elegante projector screen

OPPO: UDP-203 Ultra HD Blu-ray player

ARCAM: AVR850 seven-channel AV receiver with Dirac EQ calibration; P429 four-channel Class G power amplifier

KEF: 3 x Ci3160-THX in-wall speakers (L/C/R); 4 x Ci200RR-THX in-ceiling speakers (Atmos, rears)

ARTISON: 2 x Mezzanine 8 speakers (surrounds)

VELODYNE: 2 x SPL1000 Ultra subwoofers

RAKO: Smart lighting control

CONTROL 4: System control

SALAMANDER: 7 x cinema recliners

The audio system uses a mix of KEF, Artison and Velodyne models, with power and processing from a potent Arcam AVR850/P429 combi. A ceiling-mounted Sony VPL-VW320ES caters for Full HD and Ultra HD playback from an Oppo UDP-203 spinner, aiming at a 110in fixed-frame screen that fills almost the whole width of the front wall, with space below for a low-profile cabinet to house the owner's PS4 (plus an additional HDMI input for guest sources).

The overall design catches the eye first, though. Custom-made buttoned velvet wall panels are broken up by black 'marbled' columns, each adorned with gold trim and lighting boxes, while the ceiling soffit – while also housing speakers – features downlighters and an LED run. It's a room with a luxurious feel. Just what the hardware deserves... ■

C. The cherry on the cake

The Salamander Talia cinema seats use the company's Cherry microsuede fabric finish – colour-matched by the wall panels

D. Dirac on tap

Calibration of the 7.2.2 array is handled via the Dirac EQ suite built into Arcam's AVR850 receiver, with additional amplification from an Arcam P429

E. Sizable sonics

KEF's Ci200RR-THX speakers (employed here in-ceiling) feature 8in drivers

F. Get a handle on it

One of the velvet panels hides the entrance door; for room symmetry, the one opposite also features a retro art déco handle





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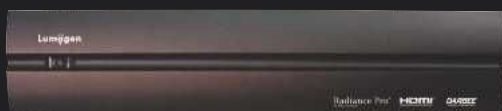
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Cinema technology seems to improve year on year, offering us that glorious immersive cinema experience. You would be forgiven for thinking this race for the perfect sound and image is a modern trend, but no dear reader, the march of progress has been with us since the 1920s, when Al Jolson starred as The Jazz Singer, the first feature length 'talkie' in 1927. Innovations in projector and screen technologies were quick to follow.

As movie lovers, we base our entire business on the history and the future of cinema. So we take this opportunity to pay homage to the genius of the crazy dreamers, who have pioneered the technologies that power the dream machine that is cinema.

When Bwana Devil (yes really) hit the silver screen in 1953 audiences were treated to their first 3-D experience. Audiences were thrilled - or scared witless, as spears seemed to hurl from the screen right into their seats. Although the technology is still around today, it was knocked right off the screen with the advent of CinemaScope – a stunning breakthrough based on anamorphic lens technology. Thus widescreen cinema was born. Movies such as How to Marry a Millionaire and The Robe (1953) gave audiences a rare visual treat. As screen technology improved, we saw The King and I (1957), with a widescreen image of 55mm, only to see that extravaganza surpassed with the release of South Pacific (1958) in a 70mm print.

Meanwhile audiophiles were working on immersive sound. Although industry insiders insisted that digital sound would not work in cinema, Jurassic Park opened our ears to the first digital movie technology. The arrival of digital sound heralded continually improved sound quality in home cinema.

The magic of cinema is often seen as the result of a good story well told. The actors and directors are given all the credit for success, while often the audience thrills to unseen advances in sound and vision that transport the viewer to a unique, immersive experience. Our hats are off to the pioneers of technology, in digitalised sound and vision, who lead the march to better and better cinema experiences.

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REVIEWS

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HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

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42 KEF Q SERIES 5.1.2/£3,300

Ed Selley enjoys the highs and lows of this KEF array

Atmos joins KEF's Q branch



1

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The Q Series remains KEF's entry point for tower speakers, below the R Series and Reference lines, and the super-stylish and super-expensive Blade and Muon models. If you're looking for the KEF sound writ large, this is where you'll probably start.

The Qs are now into an eighth iteration, having originally launched back in 1991. Much has changed over the years (including the provision of Dolby Atmos support, more on that later), but one thing has remained constant – the use of a Uni-Q driver.

KEF watchers will be familiar with the Uni-Q, but here's a quick recap. By mounting a tweeter unit at the acoustic centre of a midbass driver, the brand claims it gets 'closer than ever' to the holy grail of a single point source, bringing with it benefits in sound dispersion and sonic clarity.

A Uni-Q driver, in one form or another, is used in every speaker in this package, bar the subwoofer. They are visibly similar to ones we've looked at in the past, featuring as they do items like the tangerine waveguide (which as well as improving dispersion gives a cool jet-engine vibe to the drivers). Behind the scenes, however, the Q Series drivers feature a new tweeter loading tube, intended to beef up lower treble performance and ensure a better crossover between the high and midbass units.

The package in question is a 5.1.2 system, with a retail price of a fraction under £3,300. On front left and right duty are KEF's Q750s (£1,150-per-pair); for the surround channels we have the £530-per-pair Q350 standmounts. These are joined by the Q650C centre channel speaker (£550), the only such model in the Q range. As the latter uses 6.5in drivers, those who want the same units across their LCR stage will have to go with this overall system. There are smaller floorstander (Q550) and standmount (Q150) models available, but these feature 5.25in Uni-Q drivers. There's also a flagship Q950 floorstander, where the Uni-Qs expand to 8in.

Unusually, there are two different methods of bass management in use across the Q range. The Q350s have a rear-mounted bass port, employing 'Computational Flow Dynamics' to ensure the greatest efficiency combined with the lowest noise. The Q750 floorstanders, on the other hand, are sealed cabinet designs.

While there appear to be four drivers in this towering cabinet, only two of them are conventionally wired to the crossover. The other two are auxiliary bass radiators, which help control low-frequency energy in the cabinets – a practice more commonly seen in subwoofers. This is also the system used in the Q650C.

As if KEF was wanting to go all in on cabinet options, the Q50a is a traditional sealed box. And the Q50a, perhaps, is what elevates this package beyond its myriad mid-range competitors...

All aboard the Atmos express

When Dolby Atmos was announced, audio brands were given an opportunity but one that came with caveats. Sure, it was a chance to sell more speakers, but it had to be balanced against consumer desires to keep things neat and tidy. Over the years, people have shown resistance to having more than five channels of speakers in their room – particularly if a physical, paint-work-ruining installation was also required.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
5.1.2 floorstanding speaker system

POSITION:
KEF's entry-level largescale speakers, above compact T and E Series

PEERS:
DALI Opticon 5.1;
ELAC Debut 5.1.2

1. The Q750 floorstanders feature dual passive radiators for a low-end boost

KEF was early out of the blocks with a response. Its R Series speakers were joined by the R50, an upward-firing Dolby-certified speaker for placing on top of an existing stereo pair (either at the front or back of an array). This was potentially not as elegant as building the angled driver into the same cabinet, but with a strong pedigree in stereo (and an ongoing desire to keep it), KEF probably felt this was the better solution. Now the Q Series has been updated and the same principle applied.

While this is good news for Atmos fans, it's also good news for less committed multichannel users. The Q50a (£450 per pair) is designed to work equally happily mounted on a wall as a surround speaker (two internal brackets are fitted), with its 5.25in Uni-Q driver angled downwards towards the listener from a suggested elevation of 2ft above ear-height.

'After years of fettling and multiple generations, the Uni-Q driver is able to do things unusual at the price'

There is no dedicated Q Series subwoofer. Therefore, taking on LFE in our package is KEF's brand-new Kube10b, a relatively compact and affordable model (£600) featuring a 10in custom driver in a sealed cabinet. A 300W Class D amp provides the power, in collaboration with KEF's bespoke iBX (Intelligent Bass Extension) DSP engine, resulting in a lower claimed extension (24Hz rather than 35Hz) over the previous 10in Kube2. 8in and 12in Kube models are now also available.

Aesthetically, there are some pluses and minuses to what KEF has done with this latest version of the Q Series. Compared to the previous generation, which had a fair few visual adornments, the new models seem almost minimalist, with only the tweeter being finished in a colour other than that which you ordered the speaker in. The finish options at the time of writing were white and the black you see here. This lack of additional detailing does mean that the black KEFs really are very black indeed. This is brilliant for anyone looking for something for a projector-based setup, but at times I felt like I was hosting a convention of monoliths from *2001: A Space Odyssey*...



These are also fairly large speakers. The Q750 isn't that tall but it is pretty deep, and it uses a set of outriggers (not photographed) which considerably increases the footprint. The Q650C is also a bit of a whopper. It mirrors the driver complement of the Q750, less a single ABR, but at 63cm wide, you are going to need a fair amount of space for it. The news isn't all bad, though. The Q Series are beautifully made and KEF's use of ABRs has ensured that the front speakers are easy to place and also impressively sensitive.

Effortless Uni-Q

Connected to a Yamaha AVR and Emotiva A700 power amp (the latter handling the main five speakers), the KEFs proved easy enough to get in and running once I elbowed some equipment out of the way of the Q650C. And once you settle down and start listening, KEF trademarks are present from the very beginning. After multiple generations and two decades of fettling, the Uni-Q driver really is able to do things that are unusual at the price. There is a depth and effortless three-dimensionality to the way that they render a soundstage that is addictive.

This means that when you give the KEFs something sizable to get their teeth into, the result is extremely convincing. Immortan Joe's speech to the massed crowd at the foot of the citadel in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Dolby



Atmos, Blu-ray) is conveyed with a real sense of his distance to the crowd and the vastness of the surrounding wasteland. Within this space, the crucial effects are placed with pinpoint accuracy – buzzing flies, clanking empty pots and crowd chatter pepper the soundscape. As you might hope with an identical Uni-Q in each main cabinet, the blend between speakers is exceptionally good, and across the front three in particular the effect is absolutely uniform.

This is down in no small part to the Q650C. It might be a big lad but this lends it the ability to generate a sense of monstrous scale in keeping with the Q750 floorstanders. It also does a fine turn with voices. Later in *Mad Max...* in the middle of the sandstorm, Nux's deranged intonation is replicated perfectly amongst the soundmix's medley of other noises. What I found most rewarding about this is that while the KEFs can unpick the most congested material, they don't do it in a manner so analytical that you lose the fundamental joyous insanity of the film.

The Q50a Atmos module does a cracking job too. I was actually given four to play with, and my listening flitted between 5.1.2 and 5.1.4, placing them atop the respective main speakers. Their output melds smoothly with the larger enclosures, and the extra sense of scale and immersion they add to the sandstorm sequence is beautifully judged. Something that helps the Q50a deliver the goods is that it has meaningful range of its own. KEF quotes a figure of 95Hz for the lower roll off, but in-room and placed on the substantial cabinet of another Q Series speaker, it feels like there is more than that available. Grippy rubber feet are fitted to help keep the unit in place; this also ensures there is no sign of cabinet resonance or any other unwanted noise.

The real star turn for the KEFs is with that rarest of things, subtle use of Atmos. As you might imagine, they handle the immediate aftermath of the water landing in *Sully* (Blu-ray, Dolby Atmos) exceptionally well, but I was equally impressed with how they conveyed the enveloping ambience of the airport terminal. The scale they impart is beautiful but nuanced – the sort of thing that you don't notice until you unplug them. This isn't the time to talk about the 'correct' use of height effects but this has to be one of the more worthwhile examples for me.

Against this largely positive assessment, there isn't much to be negative about the system as a whole. The Q350 standmount is a fine performer, but an issue that I found when I reviewed them in a two-channel configuration – of slightly overcooked bass when positioned too close to a wall, something that is more likely to happen when used as a surround speaker – surfaced again. This can be countered by repositioning, breaking out the foam bungs for their rear ports, or experimenting with crossover settings.

For a slightly more affordable package you might consider using the Q50a model for surround channels, as it has the performance power and, if you wall mount it, you get some floor space back, too.

The performance of the Kube10b is also on the money. Its bass tones mesh well with the other speakers, and it has rather more low-end shove than might be expected for a sub of this size. There's also agility in evidence; it starts and stops at the right moments, making for a tight, well-defined low-frequency layer that increases the cinematic appeal of the whole array. In truth, if you must have the sort of bass that you perceive as a slightly urgent feeling in your lower

SPECIFICATIONS

Q750

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6.5in aluminium Uni-Q midbass driver with 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter; 1 x 6.5in aluminium bass driver; 2 x 6.5in auxiliary bass radiators
ENCLOSURE: Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 48Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 88dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W **DIMENSIONS:** 323(w) x 977(h) x 310(d)mm (with plinth) **WEIGHT:** 16.5kg

Q650C

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6.5in aluminium Uni-Q midbass driver with 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter; 1 x 6.5in aluminium bass driver; 1 x 6.5in auxiliary bass radiator
ENCLOSURE: Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 64Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 88dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 150W **DIMENSIONS:** 629(w) x 214(h) x 304(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 13.6kg

Q350

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 6.5in aluminium Uni-Q midbass driver with 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter **ENCLOSURE:** Ported **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 63Hz-28kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 87dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 120W **DIMENSIONS:** 210(w) x 362(h) x 306(d)mm (with rubber feet) **WEIGHT:** 7.6kg

Q50a

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 5.25in aluminium Uni-Q midbass driver with 1 x 1in aluminium tweeter **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 96Hz-19.5kHz **SENSITIVITY (CLAIMED):** 86dB **POWER HANDLING (CLAIMED):** 100W **DIMENSIONS:** 180(w) x 174(h) x 259(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4.25kg

Kube10b (subwoofer)

DRIVE UNITS: 1 x 10in woofer **ENCLOSURE:** Sealed **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 24Hz-140Hz (+/-3dB) **ON BOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** 300W **REMOTE CONTROL:** No **DIMENSIONS:** 370(w) x 353(h) x 370(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 17.4kg **CONNECTIONS:** Stereo phono input/LFE input; speaker-level input

PARTNER WITH



MAD MAX: FURY ROAD:

A brilliantly straightforward action flick endowed with an Atmos soundmix that evokes the smell of petrol fumes. Pick up last year's Black-and-Chrome Blu-ray edition for a chance to watch it with alternative grading.

intestine, then this may fall short, but given how easy it is to place and live with – helped by a clever switch that alters the frequency response for wall, corner or free-space positioning that really does work – I can see many people being perfectly happy with it.

New contender

In fact, I can see plenty of people being perfectly happy with this KEF collection full stop. I'm not going to pretend to being the biggest fan of its industrial design, but looks are subjective (I know HCC's editor is a fan) and this is a set of speakers that's so continuously sonically convincing it really doesn't matter. Presentation is spacious, lifelike and balanced between the channels, while the cabinets are easy to drive. Throw in their excellent Atmos integration and you have a brilliant new contender at the price point ■

HCC VERDICT



KEF Q Series 5.1.2

→ £3,300 → www.kef.com/gb

WE SAY: This Q Series package delivers an outstandingly cinematic and largescale presentation (with Atmos highs) from well-built speakers.

2. KEF's Q50a Atmos units are sealed box, Uni-Q driver designs

3. The Kube10b back-plate features an EQ switch for in-room, corner or wall/cabinet installation



Denon has invited all 3D audio formats to an AV party – plus **Richard Stevenson**

Next-gen sound united



Evolution, not revolution, is a good way of describing Denon's AVR-X6400H. This £2,100 AV receiver takes last year's very fine AVR-X6300H, adds a few features, sprinkles in some new components and ices the cake with Auro3D format support straight out of the box. I like it already.

The engineering and cosmetic design are untouched. On the outside it's a black box, with two big knobs, blue-tinted display and a flap concealing buttons and sockets. That'll be an AVR then. Inside is Denon's Monolithic amplifier layout, custom transistors and a power output claimed to be 205W for all of its eleven channels. Into a more realistic 8 ohm load with real movie material

the suggestion is nearer to 140W per channel. Put another way, this isn't short on power for a one-box AV offering.

This new kid gets Denon's flagship AL32 multichannel processing and 192kHz/32-bit DACs. There is 5.1 bi-amping mode, Dolby Vision HDR compatibility, and eARC. Dolby Atmos 7.1.4, DTS:X and Auro3D are all catered for with an incredibly flexible speaker positioning setup.

In fact, from 7.1.4 to full triple-layer Auro, there is quite a bewildering array of speaker combinations in between. Okay, while you could count all the mainstream Auro3D BDs on one hand and still have enough fingers left over to do some impressive shadow-puppetry, you also get AuroMatic upmixing. This takes channel-based and object-based formats and re-maps them to an Auro speaker config.

The AVR-X6400H features Bass Sync, first seen on Denon's X7200WA. This aims to compensate for LFE



3

Selecting your current speaker configuration is easy. Choosing a new speaker configuration from scratch, less so. You see, Dolby/DTS and Auro3D have rather different 'best' speaker layouts for your 11 channels. Dolby Atmos is 7.1.4, comprising traditional 7.1 plus four speakers in the ceiling. Auro3D here uses a traditional 5.1 setup, plus four speakers placed above the surround and main pairs, angled down to the listener. A further single ceiling speaker above the listener acts as a top layer, otherwise known as Auro's Voice of God channel. You need one or other speaker setup, as the twain does not meet easily. It is an either/or thing, really.

Now those with the correct number of countable fingers will note that last configuration is 10-channel, or 'Home Theatre/Small Room' setup as Auro calls it. Denon has not integrated Auro's Centre-Height speaker, despite having a spare amp to drive it. That would have given you the full 11-channel 'Cinema/Large Room' setup.

'The Denon's sound is quick-footed and articulate – bass thunders but never drowns or overbears the details'

So, what do you do? Well, as Atmos, DTS:X and Auro are all object-based processing, arguably it's not that important where your speakers are. The AVR's setup and processing should make the best of whatever speaker configuration you have. The issue is you need to tell the amp you have an Auro speaker setup to use Auro3D or AuroMatic upscaling. Tell it you are all Dolby and it only gives you Auro2D.

Given the plethora of native Dolby/DTS material, we would suggest running 7.1.4 and then just telling the AVR that the layout is Auro and let Auro jiggle its processing to suit that speaker arrangement. That's what I did... although I probably should have checked the Denon's lack of HC channel ability before installing another speaker just for this review. D'oh!

Sounds familiar

Sonically, there is not much difference between the AVR-X6400H and last year's X6300H. That is no bad thing at all. The sound is quick-footed, detailed and articulate. Unlike Denon AVR's of old that crafted action movies with Uzi gusto and steroidal bass, this latest generation is more refined, more spacious and probably more faithful to the director's intent.

Despite *Lucy* being one of Scarlet Johansson's most Marmite cinematic endeavours, it's a visual and aural delight. Even though the regular BD is saddled with a 5.1 mix (when it was Atmos in the cinema... go figure), there is no shortage of sonic fiesta. When a drug-fuelled Lucy bounces around her prison cell, the sound is super-dramatic and filled with well-placed effects. Bass thunders along from my twin-sub setup but never drowns or overbears the details.

Switching straight to Morgan Freeman's monologues at chapter breaks is a jolt. The large lecture theatre really highlights the Denon's skill at crafting ambience. You are moved seamlessly from drama in a cramped cell to open, spacious and relaxed academia. Morgan's voice has a pleasing bassy tone – lesser amps often turn that into an over-rich boom, crafting a Morganzilla of a character. Not so with the AVR-X6400H. Freeman's voice remains lifelike and every bit the university lecturer.



With native Atmos sound the Denon simply goes up a notch in its spacious presentation and precision detail. That accuracy had already made me reach for *Gravity* (Blu-ray) and the AVR-X6400H renders its stunning mix with consummate ease. It doesn't simply pull you into the narrative but pulls you right into the atmosphere. Or lack thereof. The sheer sonic sense of open, vacuous space, and latterly being under water, is thrilling.

For something a little less cerebral, the *Ghostbusters* remake is a disc that will only ever grace my player again for testing purposes. It's a howling movie [*no it isn't - Ed*] but the sound is right up there with some of the funkiest Atmos soundtracks available. Its up-beat songs really show off the Denon's dynamic panache, while dialogue punches through with real intelligibility. That's not a good thing with *Ghostbusters*, but better movies will certainly benefit.

Like *Deadpool*. The AVR-X6400H steps to the plate with the big, all-action opening sequence, complete with immaculate slow-mo car-crashes and our hero's to-camera quips. The gunshots, blades, crashes, ricochet bullets and general mayhem are exquisite, backed by LFE effects with a very tight and forceful, if not seismic, punch.

If you have set up your speakers as Auro3D, you will still need to set the AVR to 3D in the movie sound format menu – there is no flagging. With an Auro test disc featuring clips from *Inferno*, the sound was every bit as immersive as Dolby Atmos. I would go so far to say there was even more space in the size of the soundstage with Auro3D. That might just be down to the mixing, but it was mightily impressive. With music test tracks, I would add that Auro sounded even better than Dolby's or DTS's equivalents.

Upscaling a Dolby or DTS mix in Auro3D was, well, interesting. I could only A/B demo using my usual speaker

SPECIFICATIONS

DOLBY ATMOS: Yes **DTS:X:** Yes **THX:** No **MULTICHANNEL INPUT:** No **MULTICHANNEL PREOUT:** Yes, 11.2 phono output **MULTICHANNEL OUTPUT (CLAIMED):** 11 x 205W (into 6 ohms) **MULTIROOM:** Yes, Zones 2 and 3 **AV INPUTS:** 5 x composite; 4 x digital audio (2 x optical and 2 x coaxial) **HDMI:** Yes, 8 x inputs; 3 x outputs **COMPONENT VIDEO:** Yes, 2 x inputs; 1 x output **VIDEO UPSCALING:** Yes, To 4K/60 **DIMENSIONS:** 434(w) x 393(d) x 167(h)mm **WEIGHT:** 14.5kg

FEATURES: Auro3D out of the box; AuroMatic upmixing; HEOS multiroom integration; Audyssey MultEQ XT32 room EQ and setup; Denon setup wizard; dual-band Wi-Fi; Bluetooth; Ethernet; USB; 192kHz/32-bit DACs; AL32 Processing Multichannel; FLAC, WAV, ALAC and DSD hi-res audio support; AirPlay; Spotify Connect; TuneIn radio; Bass Sync

PARTNER WITH



B&W DB1D: Combine the AVR-X6400H's detailed sophisticated character with a detailed, articulate subwoofer. B&W's flagship DB1D isn't cheap at £3,250, but its performance, design and setup flexibility are exemplary.

setup and some serious fiddling with settings, convincing the AVR my Dolby setup was actually Auro configured. There was very little difference in formats. Even in a quick blind test it was hard to tell, but I did end up voting for native Dolby Atmos. Was that just because my speakers were in the proper Atmos position?

I also could not get full 7.4 layering in Auro3D or AuroMatic, as the rear back info defaults to the surround speakers. I spent some time with Denon's tech department on this and it is a restriction within Auro when mapping onto a Dolby speaker matrix. Like I said, either/or then.

Aside from this, you won't be disappointed if you set out to create an Auro system with Auro speaker positioning, or a Dolby/DTS system with Dolby speaker positioning. Both are outstanding.

At which point I reckon my Marantz processor and stack of power amps are looking nervous. The Denon is very good, a fraction of the cost and delivers Auro3D without me paying for an upgrade to the Marantz. Yet switching back to my system, I was aware of more presence and sheer scale, particularly when the volume gets to ASBO levels. It's not that the Denon is short of power, but the more you push it, the more its detailed and articulate balance feels like it could do with just a little more grunt and body.

Peerless at the price

Overall, Denon's new, more grown-up and sophisticated character shines through on the AVR-X6400H. Its feature set is peerless at the price, the sonic clarity and definition outstanding and, generally, its easy to use. I'm not wholly convinced by the need or implementation of Auro3D but it's certainly a nice option to have. For just over £2k, this is on its own in terms of skills and classy performance ■

HCC VERDICT



Denon AVR-X6400H

→ £2,100 → www.denon.co.uk

WE SAY: Denon's latest AVR offers unrivalled features and Auro3D out of the box, and delivers immersive, hyper-realistic sound. A cracking receiver.

3. 11.2-channel preouts let you partner the Denon's processing with external amps

**4K HDR
MARVEL**

Spider-Man gets
a Dolby Vision
makeover on
UHD Blu, p102



The high-end Signature G7 sees LG pimping out its 4K OLED line. **Steve May** wonders if he's worthy

OLED without compromise

LG's wallpaper W7 may have been hogging the OLED TV limelight this year, but the real hero in LG's current line-up is perhaps the Signature G7. It combines the picture prowess of the brand's latest OLED panel technology with a quality of finish that wouldn't look out of place in a Dubai cocktail bar. For many, this supermodel will be a more likely purchase than its step-up stablemate.

It's undeniably flamboyant and flashy, but if you're prepared to make a premium investment in TV tech, you'll be hard pressed to find something more deserving – okay, there's B&O's Eclipse (p68), but that's even more premium.

The G7 is available in 65in and 77in screen sizes (the latter being prohibitively expensive – £20,000 if you must ask), and ranks above the brand's B7, E7 and C7 models.

The build of the G7 is designated as 'picture on glass,' and it's a worthwhile description. The panel is joined to a glass backing, which is illustrated with a pseudo carbon fibre pattern. This at least gives the impression of rigidity – I always fret when lugging OLED TVs about, as they tend to feel quite fragile.

The panel is wafer-thin, with tuner and electronics located on the back and in the pedestal plinth, rather than in a chunky backplate bulge. This base, which can be repositioned through 90 degrees to allow the G7 to be wall-mounted, houses four HDCP 2.2-equipped HDMI inputs, plus three USB inputs (one v3.0), an optical digital audio output and Ethernet.

Build quality is solidly impressive. Weighing in at close to 32kg, this is a hefty model. And the screen makes a design feature of its in-built soundbar with a grille that wouldn't look out of place on a supercar.

HDR as far as the eye can see

This 4K TV is Ultra HD Premium certified, and is HDR10 and Dolby Vision compatible, with HLG broadcast support lined up for whenever Sky/BBC get their act together. Technicolor HDR is another promised format addition, delivered by a firmware update at some point.

Somewhere amidst all this is LG's own Active HDR management, a tool tied into its Dynamic Contrast setting in the Expert Picture menus. This aims to insert dynamic

metadata into incoming HDR material – on the fly – on a frame-by-frame basis. Be aware that, if you're the kind who switches off all processing modes out of habit, deactivating Dynamic Contrast will disable Active HDR.

Unfortunately, as with the rest of LG's current range, there's no 3D support. And while the provision of a Dolby Atmos decoder is intriguing, this was limited to content delivered in a Dolby Digital Plus container (which is to say from Sky, BT TV and Netflix) during my review, with TrueHD-based streams from Blu-ray unsupported.

LG had said previously it would address this shortcoming with a firmware update, and – after my sample was returned – did indeed make this available. However, the firmware rollout was then suspended due to a technical 'issue', with LG confirming to me that it will be released again soon.

The set is as connected as its LG brethren, meaning you get the WebOS platform (v3.5), with its Launch Bar offering icons for apps and inputs, plus customisation. LG's menu navigation is reasonably fast, although there often seems a surfeit of sub menus to navigate.

Freeview Play support means you get a full collection of catch-up TV players, as well as Netflix, Amazon Video and YouTube. The latter stream in 4K. There's also Now TV, and a host of less familiar services.

It's a knockout

When it comes to picture performance, the G7 doesn't disappoint. Image quality is a knockout, with both HD and UHD sources. It's the same story as with the brand's other 2017 OLED models, really.

And, as with LG's other OLEDs, there are menu tweaks to make before settling down to view: ensure that Just Scan is 'On' rather than set to 'Auto' in the aspect ratio menu, to help eliminate artefacts over fine 4K detail;

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in 4K OLED TV
with integrated
soundbar

POSITION:
Below LG's W7
'wallpaper' model

PEERS:
Sony KD-65A1;
Samsung QE65Q9F

1. The TV's base doubles up as its soundbar system

2. Both zappers are colour-matched to the G7's metallic hue





SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG; Dolby Vision; Technicolor HDR (firmware); Active HDR **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview (Freeview Play); satellite **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; digital optical audio output; Ethernet **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 60W, 4.2-channel **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 'Ultra luminance' **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,461(w) x 883(h) x 243(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 31.7g

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; MiraCast; Bluetooth; USB multimedia playback; WebOS 3.5 connected platform with Magic Remote; Dolby Atmos over IP audio decoder; Netflix 4K; Amazon Video 4K; YouTube 4K

PARTNER WITH



MARANTZ NR1608: This £600 slim-line AVR has the style chops to do LG's G7 justice, plus seven-channel Atmos and DTS:X playback (for 5.1.2 setups). Movie performance is lithe and immersive, while hi-res audio support and HEOS cap off the spec sheet.

3

avoid the Sports mode as it over-eggs colour response; and, most of the time, set TruMotion to 'Off'.

The latter, actually, is where the LG really does blot its copybook. Motion handling is average, and the TruMotion processing is a heavy-handed solution to motion judder and loss of moving detail. Both the Clear and Smooth options conjure obvious artefacts around moving objects. It's an area where the brand should make improvements next year. My advice is to tweak the User setting; for instance, I found sports material benefiting from Dejudder set to '4' and Deblur to '10'.

'The G7 is monstrously impressive – HDR dynamics are profound and the in-built sound system rocks'

Still, LG's image presets (apart from Sports) are well-judged, with Standard a good choice for watching in environments with ambient light, and Cinema an option for lights-out viewing. When fed an HDR source, the presets are automatically adjusted to suit.

OLED's traditional deep blacks ensure dynamism, and guarantee that films look like films. Any CinemaScope ratio Blu-ray makes an immediate impression with the unsullied blackness of its top-and-bottom bars, where other displays can render these as splotchy and uneven.

Black crushing caused by tone-mapping UHD Blu-ray content is negligible, and the screen has enough brightness to contrast well. A 5 per cent window peak luminance measurement, using the Standard image preset, exceeded 700 nits. This translates to a powerful, yet comfortable, HDR viewing experience.

There continues to be a good deal of hype around Dolby Vision. It uses dynamic metadata to optimise HDR content on a frame-by-frame basis, but its implementation can be a bit unpredictable. Here, though, Marvel's *Jessica Jones* (Netflix) benefits from subtle use of the tech, optimising light sources to give a natural look.

The TV also has a superb colour performance, with the costumes and set design of *Star Trek Discovery* (Netflix)

providing plenty of opportunities for its expansive palette to dazzle the eye.

This 10-bit panel upscales HD to 4K with assurance. If you have a significant collection of Blu-ray discs, expect this screen to give them a new lease of life. It's SDR presentation has cinematic sparkle. When Deckard first meets Rachel ('Do you like our owl?'), in *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (Blu-ray), the room is heavily shadowed, yet it remains beautifully lit. Jordan Cronenweth's celebrated cinematography is fittingly handled.

Sound is often a thin-screen's downfall, but not here. The integrated soundbar is very effective. It's has a warm delivery and there's plenty of volume to abuse (power is rated at 60W). Yet while LG optimistically describes it as 4.2-channel, the output doesn't come close to surround sound, even with that previously mentioned Dolby Atmos decoder onboard. The form factor here simply can't offer an Atmos listening experience.

Partnering the TV with an Atmos-equipped AVR, routing Atmos bitstreams over HDMI ARC, is the obvious solution. A soundbar upgrade, on the other hand, wouldn't offer significantly more than the TV's own speakers with most content.

Class swot

Firmware delays notwithstanding, the G7 is monstrously impressive. As part of LG's Signature portfolio, it's convincingly best-in-class. HDR dynamics are profound, the WebOS smart platform sophisticated and that integrated sound system rocks.

There are, of course, serious challengers on the OLED front. Panasonic, Sony and Philips all offer high-performing, better-value rivals. Yet the G7 is never outmanoeuvred, and offers enough differentiation (Atmos decoding, swivel-base stand...) to warrant its place ■

3. The 'picture-on-glass' design is, says LG, 'future-oriented'...

HCC VERDICT



LG OLED65G7

→ £6,500 → www.lg.com/uk

WE SAY: The Signature G7 can be considered a glorious OLED indulgence. Frighteningly expensive, but it's a beautiful screen with a sublime AV performance.

Hygge.

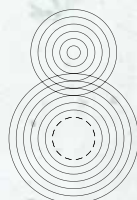
Who says it needs to be all about lamps and couches?

“What are you doing for your 40th birthday?”, everyone asked. We thought about it and decided that since we aren't wild about lavish cakes (although we do love a tasty fastelavnsbolle), we'd celebrate a little differently. Even the *thought* of making new speakers makes us warm and fuzzy, so that's what we chose to do.

Meet the Special Forty: hygge for your ears.

Laurels aren't for resting on, which is why we gave Dynaudio Labs free rein to play. (It gave our accountants a heart attack.) Our only instruction: take our classic tech and see what you'd do differently this time. Their design was nothing short of genius.

They took our classic Esotar 28mm soft-dome tweeter design, put our DSR* precision coating on it, and then **machined an aerodynamic vent** directly into the powerful neodymium magnet. Then they added more damping material and another pressure-release conduit. Take it apart and look behind it: it's a work of art (except please don't; we spent ages putting it together).



We made the drivers' frequencies overlap so we could keep the first-order crossover simple. After all, why add things that might affect the signal if you don't have to?

We called the new tweeter the Esotar Forty, and it's exclusive to this speaker.

We also gave the Special Forty a new woofer, made from our own super-stable Magnesium Silicate

Polymer. Its dome is coupled directly to the voice-coil for incredibly precise midrange performance. That's aided by the **new AirFlow Basket** – an aerodynamically shaped chassis that optimises rear airflow and isolates the driver from unwanted vibrations and resonances.

The woofer also has a **custom magnetic field** – one we created in the lab – thanks to a unique hybrid magnet system. It's part ferrite, part neodymium, and it physically manipulates flux to bend it around the voice-coil for greater power and efficiency.



The magnet sits inside the voice-coil (others put it outside). That lets us beam its energy to where we want it to go – not where it wants to go.

Those innovations mean the tweeter can reach down to 1000Hz, and the woofer up to 4000Hz. That overlap means smoother integration between treble and bass, and **performance that borders on mesmerising**.

We don't want to bore you with the maths, so here's the English: the extra air movement and flux containment means we have more control over how the tweeter and woofer move. And that means **a more detailed, precise and honest performance**. Just what we (and you) want.

This is a simple-looking speaker. Sure. But wait until you see its Grey Birch High Gloss and Red Birch High Gloss finishes. We painstakingly laminate Finnish Birch veneers many, many, *many* times and cross-cut

them to achieve this striking pattern. Then we use special stains to bring it out even further. Nice, isn't it.



The biggest decision you'll make today: Red Birch High Gloss or Grey Birch High Gloss? (Or just get one of each. You know it makes sense.)

We want to know what you think.

Join our Special Forty group and together we'll take our technology to the next level. That's right: you can be actively involved in shaping the future of our R&D. And you might even find your idea making it into our next-generation speakers. There's a fastelavnsbolle – and warm feelings of hygge – in it for you if you do.

www.dynaud.io/SpecialFortyForum

**Special occasion.
Special speaker.
Special Forty.**



*Wondering what 'DSR' stands for? It's Dynaudio Secret Recipe. And that's all you're getting out of us – apart from a fantastic tweeter, of course.



The VPL-VW260ES is a great option for resolution purists, reckons **John Archer**

Sony sells 4K for less

The 4K projection world is a bit complicated, with different technologies from various brands offering UHD resolutions, some with a level of pixel fudgery going on. Sony's now long-running native 4K SXR range, filtered down from the company's professional cinema division, can therefore feel like a reassuring oasis of calm amidst a tempestuous market.

The lineup is currently four-strong, if you ignore Sony's ultra-short-throw 4K model, and comprises the flagship laser-based VPL-VW760ES (£15,000), and the lamp-based VPL-VW550ES (£9,900), VPL-VW360ES (£7,500), and the model on my test bench, Sony's most affordable native 4K projector yet: the £5,200 VPL-VW260ES.

Domestic goddess

This UHD beamer, available in either black or white guises, gets off to a strong start with its pleasingly domesticated design. It sits on a relatively compact footprint by 4K model standards (although still nearly 50cm wide and designed to be wall/ceiling mounted, rather than sat on a coffee table), and deploys the same elliptical sculpting as Sony's more expensive designs.

The rather clumsy-looking hole in the bodywork around the centrally mounted lens is the only obvious sign that the VW260ES is cheaper than Sony's other 4K beasts. The lens itself, though, still seems up to the job, as we'll see later.

Connections are tucked under the projector's sides, and include two HDMI ports. Only the second of these supports HDCP 2.2, which seems a little penny-pinching even for Sony's entry-level model. There's a built-in 3D emitter (the projector supports active playback) but as glasses are optional and I wasn't supplied any, this feature went untested.

It's important to note that neither HDMI has the bandwidth to handle 4K at 50/60Hz while maintaining full 4:4:4 chroma subsampling. So if you play the *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* 4K Blu-ray into the VW260ES, its groundbreaking 60fps frame-rate will be retained, but you'll see from the projector's video info menu that chroma subsampling has dropped from

the 4:4:4 level attained with normal 24fps 4K Blu-rays to 4:2:0. While this isn't ideal, in truth it only slightly impacts *Billy Lynn's* colour accuracy and cleanliness – and you could argue that the unusually high frame-rate more than compensates (even if it also makes the film almost unwatchable, but that's an aesthetic debate for a different day).

The VW260ES features a 12V trigger port alongside its not quite full-bore HDMI ports, while setup uncovers

an extensive range of colour and contrast adjustments to keep calibrators happy – even if they're not all presented in a particularly standard way.

While exploring the setup options I was reminded of the two key features that this projector has had to sacrifice to hit its price point compared with the step-up VW360ES. These are a dynamic iris for adjusting light output 'on the fly' in response to changes in the content being shown; and any lens memory feature you might have used for storing different settings to suit different movie aspect ratios. There isn't even a manual iris adjustment.

You still get a contrast enhancer, though, and the usual Low or Normal lamp settings. It's also nice to find that even this projector retains motorised zoom, focus and image shift, as well as a simple test pattern to help you get its picture positioned and focused on your screen.

Dabbling with Reality

Sony's Reality Creation system is also offered, with its sharpness and colour-boosting processing. This seems to have earned a bit of a Marmite reputation among Sony projector users, but I personally think it's worth at least experimenting with, as long as you resist

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Native 4K HDR PJ with motorised lens, using SXRD tech

POSITION: Sony's entry-level 4K projector, above Full HD models

PEERS: Epson EH-TW9300; JVC DLA-X5500

1. HDR playback support includes HLG

2. The PJ comes with Sony's familiar backlit remote control



2



the temptation to set its sharpness component too high, where images can look unnatural.

One last thing to be aware of is that while the VW260ES can play the HLG and HDR10 HDR formats, it doesn't follow Sony's latest high-end TVs in offering any compatibility with the Dolby Vision dynamic metadata HDR platform.

Feeding the Sony a selection of my favourite 4K Blu-rays reveals a generally better picture than I'd expected given the projector's relatively lowly status in Sony's range. But I'll kick off with one area of concern: issues raised by the lack of a dynamic contrast system.

The thing is, black level response with HDR sources is only fair to middling. There's clearly more greyness over dark scenes than I've witnessed with Sony 4K projectors

'The projector maintains its 4K clarity when showing motion – fast-moving scenes are delivered with aplomb'

that do carry a dynamic iris, as evidenced by sessions with the *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales* 4K Blu-ray (US import). It will be interesting to see how the step-up, dynamic iris-sporting VW360ES fares when we test that in a future issue.

But don't feel too despondent. While black levels could certainly be better, they don't define the VW260ES's performance. That job goes to all the stuff it does right.

Detail levels courtesy of its trio of genuine 4K chips are immense. While *Dead Men Tell No Tales* isn't overall the crispest of 4K discs, its sharpest scenes, featuring Captains Barbossa and Salazar on the deck of the latter's ship, all

look emphatically 4K on the VW260ES in a way they just don't on the pseudo 4K competition.

There's more texture in clothing, more pore and hair detail on faces, cleaner and crisper edges, and just a generally more dense look to the image that makes it seem both more 'real' (so far as a ship sailed by CGI ghosts can ever look real, anyway) and more full of depth. Put all that together, and the word you get is 'cinematic'.

The projector maintains its extreme 4K clarity when showing motion, too. Even the fast-moving *Dead Men Tell No Tales* sequences that were shot using drones – such as the 'beach chase' sequence – are delivered with judder- and blur-free aplomb.

Light touch

The VW260ES's tone mapping systems are able to present more detail in bright HDR image peaks than most rivals, despite its relatively modest 1,500 Lumens of maximum light output. Yes, 4K BDs mastered to 4,000-nit extremes, including *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *Pan*, do suffer some 'flaring out' (also known as 'clipping'). But I didn't find it as severe or noticeable as I often see with affordable projectors that try to do HDR.

Surprising for the money is how well this Sony balances the light and dark demands of HDR's hugely expanded light range. No projector – certainly no halfway-affordable one – currently in existence can do full justice to HDR Blu-ray material; there's too much of a gulf between the attributes of the source and the display tech at the other end. But Sony's relatively long experience with HDR projection helps it find a consistent and engaging balance between delivering a clear boost to the brightest parts of images, without leaving dark parts of mostly bright shots appearing dominant and devoid of detail.

As Salazar's blackened form stands foregrounded against a sun-drenched backdrop in *Dead Men Tell No Tales*, for instance, his face and clothes still look detailed and naturally integrated into the picture; he doesn't become the hollow silhouette witnessed with less thoughtfully calibrated HDR projectors.

The VW260ES isn't necessarily delivering the most accurate HDR images in terms of trying to present as wide a range of HDR's brightness as possible. But affordable projectors that attempt to do that pretty much always come a cropper at the brightest or darkest ends of the spectrum. For me it's much more sensible for a projector to slightly narrow its dynamic range, but maintain a truly enjoyable picture.

When it comes to colour response, there's no wide colour filter here, as employed on Epson's HDR models, and therefore the Sony doesn't display quite such an extreme range of hues when handling the wide colour gamut offered by 4K Blu-ray content. However, the VW260ES's pictures look much brighter than those of Epson's EH-TW7300, for example, when it's got its colour filter active, and for me that's a compromise I don't mind making.

Coming to this projector on the back of the DLP-based SIM2 Nero 4 [see HCC #279], I was reminded while watching high-contrast material that Sony's three-chip SXRD projector approach doesn't cause any of the 'rainbow' colour-stripping noise that was often subtly visible on the single-chip SIM2 – or on other 4K DLP solutions, for that matter.

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: Yes. Active shutter **4K:** Yes. 4,096 x 2,160 native resolution **HDR:** Yes. HLG; HDR10 **CONNECTIONS:** 2 x HDMI inputs (one HDCP 2.2 ready); 12V trigger port; built-in 3D emitter; RS-232 control port; Ethernet; IR input; USB (service use) **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,500 Lumens **CONTRAST (CLAIMED):** N/A **ZOOM:** 2.06x **DIMENSIONS:** 495.6(w) x 195.3(h) x 463.6(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 14kg

FEATURES: 3-chip SXRD projector; Sony Reality Creation processing; Sony Motionflow processing; 6,000-hour claimed lamp life (using projector's Low setting); vertical (+85%/-80%) and horizontal (+/-31%) image shifting; motorised zoom, focus and shift; 4K 60Hz playback with 4:2:0 subsampling; claimed 26dB operational noise; optional 3D glasses (TDG-BT500A)

PARTNER WITH



ARTCOUSTIC SL SERIES: Match your PJ and screen setup with Artcoustic's home cinema-focused speakers, which feature multi-driver arrays for increased sensitivity. The SL range stretches from monitors to towering LCR speakers and in-ceiling models.

With regular HD, standard dynamic range sources, the VW260ES continues to deliver the goods. Black levels with SDR actually look quite deep, the projector's upscaling to 4K proves every bit as impressive as the systems used in Sony's top 4K TVs, and it handles the relatively narrow colour range of SDR content with effortless panache.

Switching to SDR playback did highlight one other slight issue with this projector's HDR performance. While the VW260ES runs strikingly quietly with the lamp set to its low-power mode (as it should be for the best SDR experience), the cooling fans are much louder during HDR playback, when the lamp needs to be running high. The sound is, though, at least smooth enough not to draw undue attention to itself, and in truth I hadn't really noticed it until the quieter SDR mode kicked in. Note that Sony's quoted lamp-life of 6,000 hours relates to the lamp running in 'low'.

Returning to the positives, this is a credible machine for bigscreen gaming fans. Provided you use the PJ's fast response setting, it only suffers around 28ms of input lag on average.

Consistently watchable

As the most affordable 4K projector Sony has ever sold, the VW260ES was never going to be perfect, and sure enough, its HDR black levels aren't the greatest, and there are definite limits to the range of both brightness and colour it delivers with the highest quality sources. Head higher up the Sony level, where, for one thing, you'll find a dynamic iris, and performance naturally gets a boost.

However, this entry-level SXRD machine understands and works within its limitations remarkably well, and its 4K HDR images are more consistently watchable than those of some far more expensive rivals. Definitely one to audition ■

3. Two HDMI inputs, but only one built for 4K source playback

4. Sony has used its SXRD (Silicon X-tal Reflective Display) tech in projectors since its 2004 Qualia model

HCC VERDICT

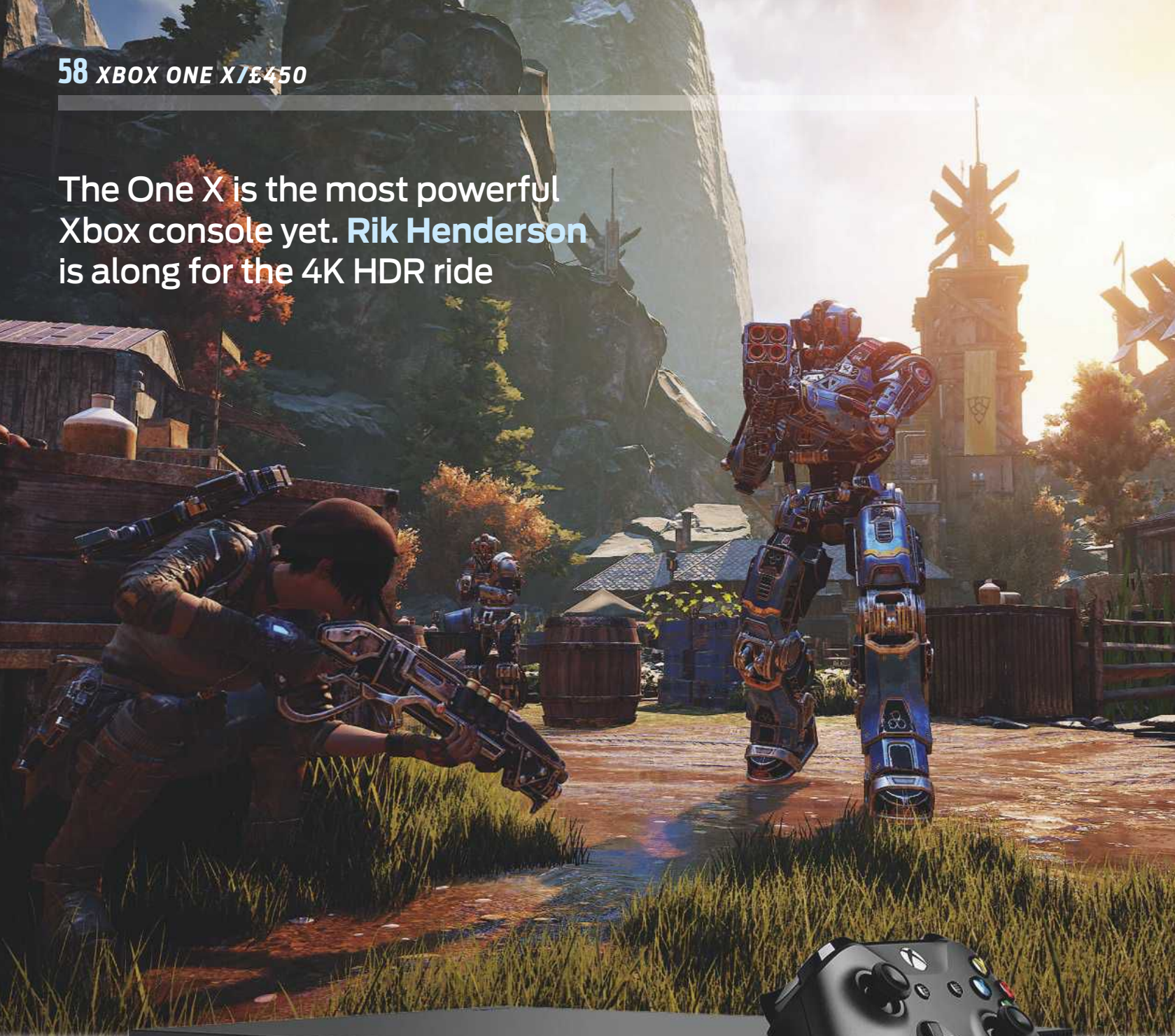


Sony VPL-VW260ES

→ £5,200 → www.sony.co.uk

WE SAY: While Sony's base-level 4K projector inevitably comes with a couple of performance strings attached, it's still a tempter for those spec'ing a premium theatre.

The One X is the most powerful Xbox console yet. **Rik Henderson** is along for the 4K HDR ride



1



1



Xbox goes fast and furious

When the original Xbox One was launched in 2013, much was made by Microsoft about its abilities as a home entertainment machine. But after the more game-centric PlayStation 4 (released the same year) sold in far greater numbers, the company soon changed its tune.

It repositioned the Xbox One and subsequent update, the Xbox One S, as games consoles first and foremost. And while the latter included a 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray player and 4K Netflix and Amazon Video support, plus high dynamic range (HDR) visuals, it was marketed more for gaming than video playback.

Now the Xbox One X has joined the party – the self-confessed ‘world’s most powerful console’ – and the emphasis has once again gone back to all-round entertainment. At £450 a pop, it’s a considerable investment after all, so you can be forgiven in wanting it to replace a number of other boxes under your telly to justify the spend.

But while there is undoubted power and potential beneath the hood, the promise currently outweighs the console’s practicality, at least in a home cinema sense. It is the equivalent to a quality gaming PC in a much smaller, friendlier package; not quite the AV do-it-all machine.

It looks the part, with a compact body that’s a shade smaller than the shell of the One S. And as it is black this time, it’s better suited to an AV cabinet – the white Xbox One S always stood out a mile. It also runs silently, or as quietly as any rival games machine, and that’s a welcome discovery considering the heat the internals must generate.

The central and graphics processing is akin to a pricier computer. The One X sports an octa-core 2.3GHz custom CPU and a 6-teraflop GPU running at 1.172GHz and with 40 compute units. In short, this is almost twice as speedy and powerful than the Xbox One S, and even beefier than its nearest rival, the PS4 Pro.

Naturally, this silicon runs hot – something you can feel for yourself by touching the lid after a long games session – but clearly keeps within acceptable boundaries to avoid external fanning. There are vents instead and vapour-chamber cooling on the main processor, as usually found on PC graphics cards, and they seem to do the job well.

Around the rear, the Xbox One X looks similar to its cheaper sibling. There is an

HDMI 2.0 output with HDCP 2.2 copy protection support, and the ability to upgrade to HDMI 2.1 sometime in the near future. An HDMI 1.4 input enables you to passthrough set-top boxes, as long as they’re not outputting at 4K resolution, which will be an issue for some now and more in the future. Additionally there are three USB 3.0 ports for external drives or accessories.

Internet connectivity is through Ethernet or Wi-Fi (802.11ac). Should you want to stream 4K HDR video over Netflix or Amazon, we’d advise the former. You also get an optical digital audio connection for good measure.

Back inside, the power of the CPU and GPU chipset is complemented by 12GB of GDDR5 RAM. This ensures the console has the potential of whipping along faster than a gaggle of aunts at the whiff of a free buffet. You immediately see some of the benefit from the start, as menus and loading times are considerably swifter than before. A 1TB HDD, meanwhile, offers app and games storage.

Ready player one?

The hardware grunt will come into play even more once games start to make the most of what’s on offer. For now, it means that developers are able to laden titles with native 4K visuals and HDR, while running up to 60 frames per second. Only a handful do as yet, but in time we expect more to join the fray.

When in full flow, it is a spectacular sight. I’ve been playing *Forza Motorsport 7* in 4K HDR 60fps on an LG E6

OLED and the visuals are so good that the experience is visceral. The game itself is superb, with dynamic weather effects that make the most of every pixel and drop of detail on offer, plus compatibility with Dolby Atmos audio, via a free Dolby Access application that handles 3D sonics for games and video content. Again, there aren’t many gaming titles available with such a soundtrack at present, but they’re growing in number.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
4K HDR games console with Dolby Atmos support

POSITION:
Flagship machine for Microsoft above the Xbox One S

PEERS:
PS4 Pro;
Xbox One S;
High-end PC



1. The console packs a 1TB HDD – but serious gamers might fill this up quickly

2. *Gears of War 4*, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Forza Motorsport 7* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* are among the first wave of 4K HDR titles

3. The controller is unchanged from the Xbox One S



SPECIFICATIONS

4K: Yes. Games; 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray; Netflix; Amazon Video; YouTube **HDR:** HDR10
HDD: Yes. 1TB, plus external drive support **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI output (v2.0); HDMI input (v1.4); Ethernet; 3 x USB 3.0; optical digital audio output; IR output
DIMENSIONS: 300(w) x 60(h) x 240(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 3.81kg

FEATURES: HDCP 2.2 on HDMI input; octa-core 2.3GHz CPU; 1.172GHz GPU; 12GB GDDR5 RAM; built-in Wi-Fi; liquid cooling plus internal fan; Dolby Atmos support; included wireless controller; external device hookup via HDMI input; 4K 60Hz support; backwards-compatible with Xbox One accessories

PARTNER WITH



FORZA MOTORSPORT 7: Released in October, this racing sim offers 4K HDR visuals at 60fps to turn your head, and over 700 cars to thrash down a straight before hitting the nearest wall. Hours of potential fun/anguish. £50 approx.

The only slight drawback is that, if you want to make use of the Dolby Atmos Headphone option, you have to pay a one-off activation fee of £14, but that might not be as relevant to home cinema buffs as bedroom gamers.

HDR is better served than Atmos, with a rapidly expanding list of compatible titles. It can be found on the One S (plus PS4 consoles) too, but works wonderfully with the higher resolutions offered by the One X. Running through the high dynamic range-enhanced streets of Paris in *Call of Duty: WWII*, for example, is jaw-dropping. Flames are vibrant and details amongst the war-torn streets add a sense of depth only 3D provided in the past.

You'll want a premium display to get the most from it, of course, but when matched with a quality 4K HDR TV, the Xbox One X is a masterful companion. For gaming, anyway. Video playback is currently a different story.

There were always going to be caveats and the machine's home entertainment prowess provides several. Netflix and Amazon Video both offer 4K HDR programming and films, but the former is restricted to just HDR10, even if your television supports Dolby Vision (DV-encoded discs are a no-go, too). For my LG E6, therefore, I continued with the native apps of WebOS 3.0.

The one upside of using the Xbox One X equivalents is that the mighty processing and RAM makes them quicker in operation and navigation, and adaptive streams settled more quickly to 2,160p, but losing Dolby Vision is a big price to pay. If your set doesn't support it though, you won't care.

There was a bigger issue with 4K Blu-ray playback. While the disc spinner in the console seems capable of playing any Ultra HD disc you feed it – something I found not to be the case with the Xbox One S – and it starts up a film at lightning pace, my audition was hampered by an issue with black level response. Video detail performance wasn't an issue, and HDR visuals looked vibrant and, at times, stunning, but blacks appeared greyed out.

Some people won't notice or care, but a tell-tale sign that something is up is that black bars top and bottom of a movie are displayed as, well, grey. And this is on an OLED TV famed for its premium black levels. HDR games on the same set with the same calibration setup looked fine, suggesting something up with the Blu-ray playback software (itself a downloadable application). Just before this issue went to press, Microsoft announced, via Twitter,

'fixes coming very soon to correct raised black levels w/HDR movies.' So hopefully this will be sorted quickly, or already have been so by the time you read this. It certainly needs to be, as without it the Xbox One X cannot compete with a dedicated 4K deck.

Futureproofed, but...

This console has potential in spades. It is the only machine that is capable of full, native 4K gaming in 60fps, with HDR and Dolby Atmos support, and in time will be served with games experiences that should blow your socks off. Yet it manages to disappoint at the same time – that HDMI v1.4 input is odd considering the otherwise futureproof appeal here, the HDD should perhaps be bigger, and its second-life as a BD spinner has got off to an unfortunate start ■

HCC VERDICT



Xbox One X

→ £450 → www.xbox.com

WE SAY: Undoubtedly the most powerful console available today, with native 4K gaming and superfast processing, but it's pricey and has a few niggles – and needs a firmware fix.



4. As well as an HDMI output, there's an HDMI input, but this doesn't allow 4K passthrough

5. The One X (left) is a similar size, a touch heavier, and a different colour...

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Q
ACOUSTICS



Amazon jungle

Navigating through the Fire TV's cluttered UI can be a chore, but, says **Steve May**, it's a worthwhile endeavour when content and image quality is so rich – and the price so good



THE LATEST ITERATION of Fire TV media streamer is ostensibly a hybrid of the original HDMI stick and Amazon's first-gen 4K media player; it's close to the size of the original, but hangs on a floppy dongle. Elegant it is not.

The only connections this time around are HDMI, and a microUSB for power. Ethernet has been given the heave-ho, the assumption being that most users will take advantage of the dual-band Wi-Fi provision.

It's certainly the most capable Fire TV box yet. Not only does it support 2160p resolution streaming at 50/60fps, but it's HDR10 compatible. It also laps up Dolby Digital+ audio, including Dolby Atmos if available (which, at the time of writing, wasn't). If you want to stream from a connected device, there's Bluetooth 4.2. The gadget also supports connection

with Bluetooth headphones, and is integrated with the Alexa voice control platform.

As with previous models, Fire TV proves to be a superb source of content. There's a huge variety of services on tap, from Amazon Video, Netflix and the main channel catch-up TV services, to more esoteric entertainments, such as Curzon Home Cinema, Crunchyroll, UFC Fight Pass and more. It's also a jazzy shopfront for Amazon Music.

The user interface for all this stuff is unremorsefully cluttered. The big loser here is actually Amazon itself. Netflix fans have recourse to the Netflix UI, but there's no walled garden solace for Amazon viewers. Trying to work out what's available is a challenge that will defeat many. It's easy to get the impression that there's really not very much on offer at all.

At least the 1.5GHz processor makes navigation sprightly. There's 2GB of memory onboard, with 8GB of storage for services.

Picture quality (broadband speed notwithstanding) can be excellent. A 15.26Mbps Netflix 4K stream bristles with fine detail; 1080p at 5.53Mbps is also astoundingly

SPECIFICATIONS

CONNECTIONS: HDMI output; microUSB (power) **KEY APPS:** Amazon Video; Netflix; BBC iPlayer; ITV Hub; YouTube; Curzon Home Cinema; UKTV Play; Plex; Amazon Music; Spotify

AUDIO FORMAT SUPPORT: Dolby Digital+ (Dolby Atmos); FLAC; MP3; PCM; Vorbis

VIDEO FORMAT SUPPORT: H.265, H.264, HDR10 **DIMENSIONS:** 15(h) x 65(w) x 65(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 87g

FEATURES: Dual-band Wi-Fi; Bluetooth 4.2; Alexa Voice Remote; variable bit-depth output; optional Ethernet adaptor

good. Rival Amazon Video streams take an age to lock (often upwards of a minute), but when they snap in image quality can be just as impressive – the fine detail on the Tick's body armour (*The Tick*, Amazon Video) is sumptuously detailed.

When it comes to colour, I wasn't aware of any banding issues. While the box will optimise on its full Auto setting, there is a manual option to select bit-rate output, be it 8-, 10- or 12-bit depending on your display. Unfortunately, movie content can't be watched in native 24fps, which is one reason to maintain faith with UHD Blu-ray.

HDR10 on streaming services remains a bit of a grab bag. Netflix leads the way, while Amazon's HDR offerings currently seem limited to select TV material. The provision, though, is welcome. Of course, if you have an HDR 4K set from one of the main brands there's a good chance you'll already have access to key services in HDR anyway. As yet, no second division apps offer it. In this case, the sheer wealth of content, and Alexa, are probably the best reasons to buy.

Incidentally, the UI itself is presented in HDR, which can be a bit of a blast to the retinas when you hop over from an SDR input.

Logical upgrade

HDR seems a logical upgrade for Fire TV, although I'm not a huge fan of the form factor. And with an emphasis on 4K HDR, you'll want the best network speed available, so relying on Wi-Fi to deliver this could be optimistic. Hardwiring the Fire TV box using an optional £14 Ethernet adapter could be a smart idea.

Caveats aside, Amazon's Fire TV remains an impressive media streaming platform, and in terms of value this talented upgrade gets ahead of the competition ■

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Amazon Fire TV 4K (2017)

→ £70 → www.amazon.co.uk

WE SAY: 4K HDR compatible, with the potential to deliver Dolby Atmos, this next-gen streamer is enticing. Alexa functionality adds to the fun.

VPL-VW760ES

- NEW Native 4K HDR LASER Projector
- 4K Resolution: 4096 x 2160
- Laser Light Source
- 2000 ANSI Lumen Brightness
- Up to 20,000 Hours Maintenance Free
- HDR Compatibility
- Exceptional Dynamic Contrast
- Demos Now Available In The UK



GETTING CHILLY

Winter has finally come to *Game of Thrones*! S7 BD review, p98

Local dimming hero?

This Samsung mid-ranger adds a Supreme UHD Dimming engine to boost its performance.

John Archer considers its appeal against some strong in-house competition

SAMSUNG'S 49IN UE49MU7000 TV made quite an impression on us when we tested it recently [HCC #277]. So I'm excited to be looking at that model's step-up sibling, the UE49MU8000. In theory, it should just be that little bit better...

It certainly looks fancier than its cheaper stablemate. A slender black frame and boomerang-style desktop stand both look and feel more premium than the flimsier surround and simple two-footed support of the MU7000. And the central stand here also means that you don't have to worry so much about whether the TV will fit onto your AV furniture.

You also don't have to worry about cable spaghetti. As with the MU7000, the MU8000's connections are predominantly found on an external One Connect Mini box that hooks up to the screen via a single cable.

This box carries USB ports for media playback or recording from the Freeview HD tuner to USB HDDs; wired and wireless network connectivity; and four HDMI's all built to the latest 4K and HDR-friendly specification, supporting HDR10, HLG and (via a future firmware tweak) HDR10+.

As with all of Samsung's 2017 smarts sets, there's a well-manicured UI laden with VOD options. All the main UK catch-up TV platforms are present, although as Samsung doesn't deliver these in a YouView or Freeview Play container, you're denied access to their wares via a back-in-time electronic programme guide.

Taken to the edge

The UE49MU8000's pictures are built round an edge LED lighting array capable of hitting brightness peaks of around 630 nits. This is pretty high for its price point, giving it an instant leg up with HDR playback.

A chief difference from the UE49MU7000 is the inclusion of a Supreme UHD Dimming engine. This introduces a local dimming system that can deliver different light outputs across eight picture zones.

Supreme UHD Dimming helps the set's black levels appear slightly deeper, and more consistently so, than with the same *Sully* 4K Blu-ray scenes on the UE49MU7000. There's also a little more dynamism to the picture, by which I mean that objects such as the street lights as *Sully*

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
49in 4K TV with edge-LED lighting

POSITION:
Just above the middle of Samsung's 2017 TV range

PEERS:
Sony KD-49XE9005, Samsung UE49MU7000

walks through New York at night are slightly more intense against their dark surroundings, while those dark surroundings also look slightly darker.

This marginal extra brightness delivers a touch more impact and tonal range with colours. This helps eke out a bit more punch – especially during Sully's key inquiry appearance – from the film's rich but natural palette.

As with the UE49MU7000, this screen only suffers mildly with the sort of striping artefacts in HDR colour blends that more obviously affect some higher-end Samsung TVs.

Elsewhere, this model comfortably matches the MU7000 when it comes to sharpness and detail. Despite its relatively small 49in panel, you're never in doubt – even from regular sorts of viewing distances – that you're watching a native 4K source.

The panel is a 100Hz design, compared with its more affordable sibling's 50Hz one, yet it still doesn't quite handle motion immaculately enough to deliver absolutely every last granule of detail from *Sully's* crash sequence – even if you use the set's motion processing (which can cause some minor processing glitches unless you turn it to a pretty low-powered custom setting). The picture still looks more 4K even at these moments, though, than many similarly priced rivals.

Initially during my audition I was uncomfortably aware of some shimmering noise over extremely fine 4K details in the UE49MU8000's pictures. Fortunately, though, this was fixable by simply reducing Samsung's default Sharpness setting of 50 to 40 or less.

Looking up the ladder

At this point it's important to explain that while the set's picture efforts are overall good for the money, there are limitations versus more expensive TVs. In particular, despite the shift to a local dimming system, black levels with HDR look pretty average (and miles short of OLED's prowess in this area). In fact, the MU8000's black levels are only slightly better than those of the MU7000, showing its local dimming to be subtle almost to a fault, even on its maximum setting.

There is an upside to this in that you seldom notice any really obvious stripes of backlighting around stand-out bright objects (unless you're sat at an angle of more than 25 degrees or so to the screen, where the machinations of its lighting engine become all too apparent). However, it also makes it harder for this TV to deliver as much of a step up from the UE49MU7000 as I might have expected.

And while it's inherently brighter than most TVs in its class, there are more expensive sets on the market, from Samsung and Sony in particular, that can get considerably brighter, and consequently serve up a much more dramatic and impactful HDR experience. These pricier models also tend to avoid another slight issue here: clipping in the brightest picture areas, where subtle detailing and tone work disappear from the image.

Of course, it's only to be expected that the UE49MU8000 struggles in some ways against much more expensive flatscreens. Judged more fairly against TV challengers in its price bracket, the MU8000 performs admirably with HDR and looks very good with standard dynamic range (SDR). Its black levels go from solid with HDR to really impressive when the screen

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HLG (HDR10+ via future firmware) **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB; Ethernet; optical digital audio output; RS232 **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 40W, 2.1-channel **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** Mega Contrast **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,093.5(w) x 636(h) x 47.7(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 15.1kg

FEATURES: Built-in Wi-Fi; multimedia playback; Bluetooth; Game mode; Supreme UHD Dimming system with eight zones; Ultra Black screen design; One Connect Mini box; motion processing with multiple settings; Eden smart system

PARTNER WITH



AMAZON PRIME VIDEO: This subscription VOD platform offers 4K and HDR streams (with HDR10+ in the pipeline) of original content and (some) movies, for a monthly fee of £7.99 – and you also get free delivery of your Amazon purchases.

isn't having to adapt to the brightness peaks that the format demands. Colours come across as natural and refined, too, during the SDR HD Blu-ray sequences in *Sully's* hotel bedroom.

The Samsung's handling of the 1080p *Sully* disc also illustrates just how successful the Korean giant has become at upscaling HD content to 4K resolution. The tweaked picture here feels crisply detailed yet lifelike, rather than obviously processed. Key to this is the way Samsung's upscaling engine can efficiently discern between noise and 'real' picture information.

Gamers could have plenty of fun on the UE49MU8000, thanks to a superb response time of under 20ms in both HDR and SDR, provided the TV is set to its Game picture mode. Plus, there's a surprisingly effective sound performance considering how wispy the TV's bezel and body are.

It's not the loudest or most bass-rich audio I've heard from a TV (turn to page 68 for that...), and this denies you any real sense of cinematic impact when the plane smacks into the Hudson River in *Sully*. However, the soundstage is clean and detailed, and spreads nicely beyond the confines of the TV's bodywork. It also has a likeably open-sounding midrange that doesn't give in to harshness easily, keeps voices clean and credible, and can even open up a gear or two for action scenes.

Brotherly love

Considered purely on its own merits, the UE49MU8000 is a slightly flawed but still commendable mid-range LCD TV. However, it's hard for me to strongly recommend it when it doesn't deliver enough of an improvement over Samsung's own UE49MU7000 to justify the £400-or-so price hike ■

HCC VERDICT



Samsung UE49MU8000

→ £1,200 → www.samsung.co.uk

WE SAY: Despite some merely 'okay' black levels, the UE49MU8000 is a reasonably strong TV for its money. But it struggles to justify its price premium over the UE49MU7000.

1. Samsung has pledged HDR10+ support for all its 2017 4K HDR TVs

2. The set incorporates down-firing and front-firing drivers into its slim frame



Sky's sonic slab

The Sky Soundbox is an innovative TV audio sound system that does its best work with a Sky Q set-top box. But, wonders **Steve May**, does it suit AV enthusiasts?

Sky and Devialet have teamed up for the Soundbox



If you're a Sky customer dissatisfied with television sound, then this could be the upgrade for you. Neither soundbase nor soundbar, it's a chunky alternative developed by Sky and French high-end sound brand Devialet. The end result is arguably the most sophisticated TV audio sound system yet seen – if you're a Sky Q customer, that is.

What sets the Soundbox apart from other TV solutions is its interaction with content delivered by the Q set-top box.

When connected (the speaker doesn't use HDMI ARC – instead, there's a one-in, one-out HDMI loop-through, as well as a digital optical audio output, and in-built Bluetooth), users have access to an onscreen control panel which allows you to select basic presets (Speech, Late Night and Kids), as well as Q Sound. The latter is a next-gen EQ system

that uses metadata attached to specific programming to tailor the sound of the unit.

With football broadcasts, Q Sound boosts atmospheric crowd noise; switch to F1, and car engines get a lift in the mix. Sky has developed meta-tweaks for a variety of sports. They're

certainly effective, as the soundfield widens or deepens accordingly.

Similarly, with Q Sound music playback gets a low-frequency boost, while for movies, there's a generic 'cinematic rendering' of dialogue and score. And it's here that Sky machine becomes particularly interesting.

The Soundbox doesn't offer any semblance of surround sound. Neither is it Dolby Atmos compatible. However, it uses rendering soundware to filter incoming audio into what is 'direct' (often dialogue) and background sound. This processing creates a wide sense of dimensionality, and helps with complex mixes, preventing action scenes becoming a mush.

It's clear that Sky has been closely following the long-running discussions about inaudible dialogue on TV, because that's an obvious focus here. Everything about the Soundbox seems designed to lift and clarify dialogue.

Woof woof

The Soundbox measures 37cm wide, and is only available in black. Behind its fabric cloak sit a trio of full-range drivers, with two at the rear and one firing forward, plus six woofers (claimed frequency response is down to 35Hz, onboard power is a closely guarded secret). Using reflections from your living room walls, the Soundbox hopes to create a wraparound soundstage.

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVERS: 6 x 3in woofers; 3 x 2in full-range (two rear-facing) drivers **ON BOARD POWER (CLAIMED):** Unspecified **FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):** 35Hz-22kHz **CONNECTIONS:** HDMI input; HDMI output; digital optical audio **DOLBY TRUEHD/DTS-HD MA:** No **SEPARATE SUB:** No **REMOTE CONTROL:** Yes **DIMENSIONS:** 375(w) x 95(h) x 210(d)mm **WEIGHT:** 4kg

FEATURES: Q Sound (with Sky Q hardware); Kids/Late Night/Speech presets; 360-degree sound; Bluetooth; Dolby Digital+ compatible

This impacts where it can be placed. You might think it can be parked on a shelf of a TV stand, but it needs space to breathe.

Tonally, the box is rich. The mid-range has been buffed and polished; there's no sibilance or edge to vocals. For everyday TV content, the Soundbox sounds sublime.

A fly in the ointment concerns Sky's processing trickery. AVL (Automatic Volume Level) technology is added to the audio agenda to equalise loud and quiet passages. It's intended to solve the problem of dynamic audio that has some viewers clinging to their TV remote, increasing volume during low-level exchanges and then turning it down when action gets rowdy.

My problem is that AVL is always on and cannot be defeated. The upshot is that everything basically plays at the same level, being adjusted dynamically in real time – explosions lack explosive impact, cars crash with decorum. Dynamics are the essence of great cinema sound, and the Soundbox just doesn't really have any.

On the other hand, Sky has developed this box for its mainstream TV audience, not home cinema enthusiasts, and in the process it's solved a common issue quite cleverly.

Pricing it up

If you're a Sky customer, you can get the Soundbox for £300, or £250 if you've taken a multiroom option. Providing you can accommodate its positional demands, this is a good price for a supremely well-made audio solution (non-Sky customers are tasked with rustling up £800, at which point they'll no doubt look elsewhere). However, I reckon the Soundbox needs an optional Dynamic setting that defeats AVL to make it a solid recommendation for movie fans ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: TV audio upgrade with bespoke signal processing

POSITION: Sky's debut sound accessory

PEERS: Q Acoustics M2; Samsung HW-MS650

HCC VERDICT



Sky Soundbox

→ £300 (with Sky subscription); £800 for non-Sky customers → www.sky.com

WE SAY: A tempting, innovative audio upgrade for Sky Q users, but lacking cinematic excitement.

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1



Double vision

B&O combines its class-leading sonics and stirring design with LG's OLED picture quality to stunning – if expensive – effect. **John Archer** reports

THERE ARE THREE things you need if you want to own a B&O BeoVision Eclipse TV. The first, inevitably given the B&O name, is a robust bank balance. With starting prices of £7,500 for the 55in version reviewed here and £10,800 for a 65in option, the Eclipse is comfortably more expensive than rival flatscreens.

The second thing budding Eclipse owners will need is lots of space. While most TVs these days focus on being as thin and diminutive as possible, this set is huge. Its screen slots into the top of a colossal soundbar that extends out comfortably beyond the panel edges, and a good many inches below it. Below that soundbar sits another good few inches of dark glass, designed to create the illusion that the screen is running right through the soundbar.

It's quite stunning, and that's all before you potentially add one of B&O's floorstands to the whole kit and caboodle. The most premium of these stands sets the TV on a pole, which in turn sits offset onto one edge of a circular base plate. If you get the motorised stand option the whole TV can turn left or right on the pole, or rotate clockwise or anti-clockwise on the base, just by pressing the correct buttons on the Eclipse's

exquisite (although excessively complicated) aluminium remote control.

The Eclipse can also attach to a variety of motorised or manual wall brackets all of which, again, are engineering triumphs.

The last thing you'll need to 'go Eclipse' is strong walls and foundations. When that beast of a built-in soundbar gets up and running, its multi-driver array and copious power (rated at 450W in total) shifts amounts of air that leave other TVs quaking in their tiny boots.

Superheroic sonics

With both music material and movies/TV, detail levels from the integrated three-channel arrangement are astonishing, as the Eclipse reveals subtleties of treble and bass you don't normally expect from an integrated audio system. The mid-range, too, is open and huge, offering spectacular levels of expansion. *Spider-Man: Homecoming's* split-ferry action scene was conveyed with scale and drama. Bass doesn't extend quite as far down, or slam as hard, as a dedicated subwoofer would, but it's punchy, well-timed and beautifully integrated into the bottom of that monster mid-range.

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
Premium 55in OLED TV with integrated soundbar

POSITION:
B&O's top-line TV, also in a 65in version

PEERS:
Panasonic TX-65EZ1002;
Sony KD-55A1



There is something of a sweet spot to the Eclipse's sound, not spatially, but dynamically. Run it too quietly and it sounds subdued. Run it too loud and even its sizable speakers can become harsh. To be fair, though, the sweet spot is wide, and provided you stay within it, the Eclipse sounds awesome.

Since the TV carries built-in multichannel audio decoding (though not Dolby Atmos/DTS:X), you can add to its sonic performance with extra wireless B&O speakers. Either just sides and rears, or front left and rights too, with the speakers in the TV becoming a single centre channel.

Hello darkness my old friend

While it's the Eclipse's design and immense audio abilities that set it apart from mainstream TVs, it's certainly no slouch in the picture department. In fact, I suspected this would be the case before I even switched it on. How? Because its screen is a largely untouched LG OLED C7.

To B&O's credit, it makes no attempt to hide this. On the contrary, the Eclipse name partly reflects the interaction between two great brands. And for the most part, B&O's approach makes absolute sense given the outstanding picture quality LG's C7 OLED TV series provides.

Spider-Man: Homecoming's beautifully dynamic images look sensational. Objects frequently shine with intensity against the sort of inky, natural, cloud-free darkness that only OLED TVs can deliver. It helps, of course, that the Eclipse can handle the *...Homecoming* 4K Blu-ray's Dolby Vision encode. It can also, of course, playback the HDR10 industry standard format, and is ready for HLG sources once they appear.

Colours are generally superb, looking rich and vibrant during scenes such as Spider-Man's fight with a team of mask-wearing bank thieves. This is partly because they have such deep blacks to bounce off, and partly because the LG Display panel the Eclipse uses benefits from more brightness than any previous OLED generation. This extra brightness has been key to making OLED click with HDR visuals.

The TV also delivers strong 4K detail levels. Spidey's swanky Tony Stark-created suit, for instance, looks

SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 **HDR:** Yes. Dolby Vision; HDR10; Technicolor; HLG **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; RF input; CI slot; Ethernet; **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 450W from 1 x 1in tweeter; 2 x 2.5in full-range drivers; 3 x 4in midbass drivers **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** N/A **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** N/A **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,390(w) x 995(h) x 122(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 33kg

FEATURES: Built-in soundbar with multichannel decoding; option to add wireless speakers for full surround; WebOS smart system; Apple Airplay support; Spotify Connect, Deezer, TuneIn radio built-in; Bluetooth; Wi-Fi; Chromecast; floor and wall-mounting options including motorised; multiroom audio integration

PARTNER WITH



B&O BEOLAB 50: Push the boat out so far it's a mere dot on the horizon by adding these stunning, 61kg active speakers to the Eclipse party. Specs include ICEpower amplification and three 10in woofers – pricing is £23,000 per pair...

gorgeously textured and three-dimensional, inviting you to closely inspect its fabric folds.

With no backlight in play here, pictures can be viewed from a wide angle without a disastrous drop-off in colour or contrast. However, this is actually less of a big deal on the Eclipse than usual; B&O's various mounting options give you the flexibility to angle its display to your peepers.

So wholesale is the Eclipse's embrace of the LG C7 that it even uses LG's picture processing, and deploys the same WebOS 3.5 smart system. The latter again seems a sensible choice, given how simple WebOS is to use, and how many apps it carries (Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, YouTube *et al*) compared with B&O's in-house smart system – although B&O's system does invite Deezer and Spotify Connect music streaming to the party.

It might have been interesting, however, to see if B&O's own processing could have fixed some occasional niggles associated with LG's OLED sets (motion handling in particular). Still, overall the Eclipse's pictures provide a stunning companion to its unprecedented audio.

Counting the cost

Obviously many people with everyday incomes will struggle to justify spending so much on a B&O Eclipse, even considering its unique design and sonic talents – mainly because LG's C7 OLED TVs cost as little as £1,700, and other rivals, including Sony's A1 and Panasonic's EZ ranges, plus LG's design-conscious W7 'Wallpaper' TV, are also more affordable.

But discussing price with B&O products is kind of beside the point. All that matters for the luxury brand's target market is that the Eclipse marries the sort of indomitable design and crazy sound quality its fans expect, to easily the finest picture it has ever produced ■

1. The TV uses an LG OLED panel – and LG operating system too

2. B&O dubs this its 'iconic planet stand' presumably because it allows the TV to 'orbit'

3. With the expanse of glass below, the soundbar appears to cut through the Eclipse display

HCC VERDICT



B&O BeoVision Eclipse

→ From £7,500 → www.bang-olufsen.com/en

WE SAY: Partnering B&O's design prowess and audio chops with OLED's glorious pictures proves a marriage made in heaven. But the price tag will bar most of us from enjoying it.

Roku Express

John Archer marvels at the straightforward simplicity of this affordable streaming stick

SOME STREAMING BOXES and sticks are affected by either corporate squabbling limiting their content options, or a desire to push a particular service ahead of the rest. The Amazon Fire and Apple TV boxes, for instance, are both fundamentally designed around their respective Amazon Video and iTunes platforms.

Roku, however, has been doing the streaming thing for long enough to rise above such nonsense to deliver an independent, unbiased streaming platform. And it's brilliantly effective on the brand's latest budget model.

Dubbed the Express, this little (3.3in by 1.4in) box of tricks connects to your TV via a provided HDMI cable. Then, after a setup procedure during which you'll need to activate a Roku account and are invited to pick the apps you want to install, it's ready to stream content from pretty much every streaming platform you can think of. Amazon Prime



Video, Netflix, YouTube, NowTV, GooglePlay, TVPlayer, the main UK catch-up services... they're all here, and none of them gets any preferential treatment on Roku's ultra simple (if slightly dated) onscreen menus unless you choose to prioritise it.

Roku claims its latest stick is five times more powerful than its predecessor, and its

Roku's remote is oh-so-easy to get to grips with

menus feel speedy and responsive. It also delivers HD or SD pictures from its many streaming services without fuss or blemish, and despite its diminutive size its Wi-Fi reach should cover most corners of a typical home. A supplied remote covers the basics, while Roku's app is on hand for easier searching and private listening through smart devices.

My only gripe is that the Express won't let you alter its DNS settings, which could cause Netflix problems for a small minority of users.

Other than that, for an affordable and straightforward way of smartening up a TV (if 4K isn't on your agenda), there's probably no better option out there ■

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Roku Express

→ £30 → www.roku.co.uk

WWW.MUBI.COM / £5.99 (MONTHLY)

Mubi

Mark Craven broadens his movie horizons with this unusual on-demand service

IF YOU LOOK at the Netflix catalogue and feel yourself drowning in its extensive range of movies you've already seen countless times, Mubi might be for you – particularly if you have a penchant for world/independent/art-house cinema.

A monthly subscription platform (£5.99 per month), Mubi's business model is a bit out of left-field. Rather than offering a full library

of flicks to peruse, it offers just 30 at a time. Each day, a new title is added, and one is taken away. Head to the Now Showing tab and it handily informs you how long you have left to view a selected film.

During my review, movies on offer included Takashi Miike's *Dead or Alive* trilogy, Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, documentary *Homeland (Iraq Year Zero)*, '60s black-

and-white horror flick *Experiment in Terror* (part of some Halloween programming), and plenty of modern world cinema flicks. Mubi is therefore an interesting option for those seeking fresh, varied content, with an obvious level of curation.

The platform itself can be accessed through web browsers, Android/iOS

devices, PlayStation and Nvidia Shield consoles, Roku, Apple and Amazing streaming players and Samsung and Android-based smart TVs. For phones/tablets, there's the option to download to watch offline (with a 48-hour window added to the original expiry date).

AV quality isn't a Mubi selling point – there are no 4K or HDR streams here. When content allows, HD streams are offered, adapted to your 'net connection.

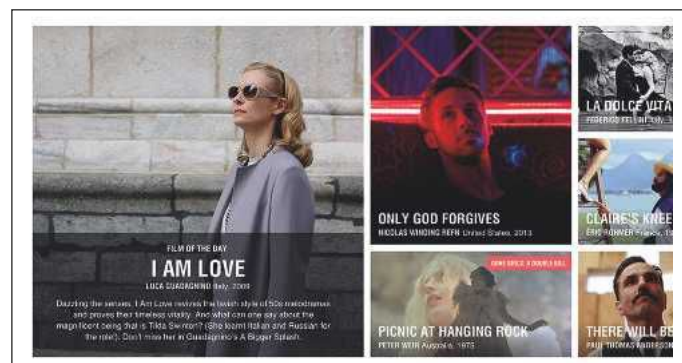
On the plus side, Mubi really does feel like a film fan's platform, with the Notebook section of its desktop UI offering essays and blogs, and movie choices accompanied by mini reviews. It's quite a pleasant place to hang around ■

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Mubi

→ £5.99 (monthly) → www.mubi.com



Power your ears

The Ella headphones partner planar magnetic drivers with an in-built amplifier to outgun the grunt from your handheld device. **Ed Selley** investigates



The headband 'looks a bit weird'

THE VAST MAJORITY of headphones on sale today use dynamic drivers, effectively shrunk versions of those found in normal loudspeakers. A small (but growing) subset of models, however, including designs from Oppo and Audeze [see *HCC* #278], advocate the planar magnetic principle.

This technology prints a voicecoil on a thin membrane and moves the whole assembly when current is applied. The resulting driver is large but extremely light, and has excellent frequency and transient response. The drawback is that the sensitivity is generally lower than a dynamic model. This means planar magnetic headphones are typically considered options for the home, but not

so hot on the move.

Blue Microphones thinks it has a solution, though. Its Ella headphones feature planar magnetic drivers and function as a normal set of cans into an AV receiver. But if you want to use them out and about, you can swap over to a short cord and – more

significantly – switch on an internal 250mW amplifier that boosts the incoming signal beyond that which most portable devices can generate.

They need to be powered in this instance, of course, hence a rechargeable battery with a quoted life of around 12 hours. It charges from flat in three-to-four hours via microUSB.

The Ella headphones, therefore, promise the best of both worlds.

The design is rather striking, all jutting silver arms and a big 'Blue' logo on the earcup. The most notable part is the multi-jointed headband, which looks a bit weird but does allow for pretty much any shape or sized noggin to find a comfortable fit. Everything feels solid and carefully assembled, so much so that they are perhaps a little on the heavy side to be truly portable, particularly as they don't fold up. You do get a smart bag to carry them around in, though.

Delicious detail

Used in their normal passive setting connected to my RX-A3040 receiver, these cans show the benefits of their specialised drivers. They handle the endless gunfire of *Suicide Squad* (Blu-ray) with real ability, capturing each round as a distinct effect rather than an amorphous, sustained noise. Dialogue delivery

SPECIFICATIONS

DRIVERS: 2 x 50mm planar magnetic drivers

ENCLOSURE: Closed-back **AMPLIFICATION (CLAIMED):** 250mW headphone amp

FREQUENCY RESPONSE (CLAIMED):

20Hz-20kHz **IMPEDANCE (CLAIMED):**

50 ohms (passive); 10 ohms (active)

WEIGHT: 481g

FEATURES: Soft carry case; rechargeable battery with claimed 12-hour life; 1.2m cable with Apple iPhone/iPad controls and microphone; 3m cable; 3.5mm to 1/4in adaptor; auto power off when headphones are closed; multi-jointed headband

is excellent. In the case of *Suicide Squad* this is neither here nor there but the rather more chatty nature of *Sully* finds them in fine voice; dialogue sounds crisp and clear with every word easy to discern. The same legibility plays well with broadcast TV.

Additionally, these closed-back cans always generate a believable sense of space, which heightens the naturalness you get from their detailed delivery.

If you connect the Ellas in exactly the same configuration to an iPad, the result is listenable but obviously lacking in headroom and dynamic heft. Selecting the headphones' internal amp (done by twisting a rotary control where the cable meets the housing, remembering to turn the volume down on your connected device first), the change in sonic performance is very significant. Even with the feeblest of headphone amps, the same spacious, rich and detailed sound signature becomes available.

Compared to using them with a high-quality external headphone amp, I noted a slightly thick presentation to their low-end response, which can make some material sound a little less open and immersive. But it's mainly not a concern. More of a concern will be the price tag of these cans.

Dual purpose

The Ella might be a little on the large side for many people to use out and about every day. However, a pair of headphones that can deliver sparkling performance at home and then just as easily be used at the office (where installing USB drivers for DACs can be frowned upon), or while laid out on your bed watching iPlayer on a tablet, has obvious appeal. They're unusual, and look a little unusual, but you might love them ■

AV INFO

PRODUCT: Closed-back planar magnetic 'phones with in-built amp

POSITION: Blue's premium consumer model, above Satellite, Sadie and Lola

PEERS: Oppo PM2; Sennheiser HD700

HCC VERDICT



Blue Microphones Ella

→ £675 → www.bluedesigns.com

WE SAY: Mixing passive headphones with an in-built amp is a smart idea, and these have the sound quality to make it even smarter.



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**LONG-TERM TEST**

Samsung 65KS9500

TIME ON TEST: 1.5 years **REVIEWER:** John Archer

EVEN IN LATE 2017, there are television sets still struggling to deal with high dynamic range images. Many aren't bright enough. Many can't deliver a wide enough range of colours. Many struggle to map HDR's light range to their screen's capabilities properly. Many of those that can do HDR brightness can't do a good black level.

All of which is why I still love Samsung's UE65KS9500. For me this was the best all-round TV of 2016. Tellingly it remains my go-to screen for testing 4K Blu-ray discs, despite having seen the best that 2017 has to offer.

What's good about it?

The UE65KS9500's screen specifications read like a wishlist of stuff you need in order to enjoy a good 4K HDR picture on a television.

Unlike other models in Samsung's K-prefixed sets, it uses direct LED illumination, in conjunction with local

dimming. Different zones of LEDs (150 in the KS9500's case) can output different levels of light to suit the content of the image being shown. This approach has consistently proved the most effective way to establish a bright, contrast-rich picture from LCD TVs with HDR material. Edge-lit LCD solutions are typically hampered by too much greyness in dark areas, too many obvious 'bands' of light, and a compromise between luminance extremes.

Still, the Full Array Local Dimming (FALD) UE65KS9500 isn't flawless in lighting terms – you can sometimes see halos of light clouding around stand-out objects. But this is much less distracting than the issues associated with edge lighting, and often almost invisible in environments with a little ambient light.

Rival OLED technology, of course, suffers no haloing, greyness or clouding, nor does it have to manage the intensity of its peak luminance to maintain a credible black level. However, this Samsung out-guns all OLED challengers, even more recent models, with its brightness reach. Put simply, in this regard it is immense. It hits around

AV INFO

PRODUCT:
65in direct-lit 4K
HDR LED TV

POSITION:
Samsung's flagship
model for 2016

PEERS:
Sony KD-65ZD9;
Samsung QE65Q9F

1,500 nits in the brightest areas of HDR pictures, which in 2016 was miles ahead of any of the competition. It can do this while still providing some of the deepest, uniform black levels in the LCD TV arena. An outstanding achievement.

In fact, Samsung's flagship 2017 QLED TVs may have managed to get even brighter, but not while retaining such good control over dark areas.

The UE65KS9500 is also a master at colour handling. It combines its high but targeted brightness with an expansive tonal range; wider than any set we'd seen up to 2016. It's therefore able to deliver the fullest expression of what HDR and the usually attendant wide colour gamut technology can do.

Again, Samsung's QLED models ratchet up the colour response even further. But problems with backlight clouding and bleeding can mean hues often look less natural, at least in patches, than they do here.

'Samsung's direct-lit LED LCD TV combines high, targeted brightness with an expansive colour range'

This set also delivers state-of-the-art management of colour tones and light shades in the peak parts of HDR content. In this respect it outperforms my other favourite 4K HDR TV, the phenomenal Sony KD-65ZD9, with its 600 zones of locally dimmed LED backlights, as the Sony 'clips' in very bright areas, losing detailing in the process. There are some things I prefer about the 65ZD9, including its raw HDR impact and form factor (more on this in a minute), but when I'm looking for a TV to show me everything that's in a 4K HDR image, the UE65KS9500 has the edge.

As an LCD panel, there's no need to worry about potential screen burn issues with this Samsung. I don't want to overstate OLED's susceptibility to screen burn; it's something LG has been tackling in recent years, and it may well never affect typical users. However, it's something that lurks in the back of mind, as I tend to run my reference set for long periods on a daily basis and, probably, with more consistently aggressive HDR content than your normal consumer.

2



SPECIFICATIONS

3D: No. **4K:** Yes. 3,840 x 2,160 resolution **HDR:** Yes. HDR10; HDR10+; HLG **TUNER:** Yes. Freeview HD; satellite **CONNECTIONS:** 4 x HDMI inputs; 3 x USB inputs; optical digital audio output; RF input; Ethernet **SOUND (CLAIMED):** 60W, 4-channel **BRIGHTNESS (CLAIMED):** 1,400 nits **CONTRAST RATIO (CLAIMED):** 'Mega Contrast' **DIMENSIONS (OFF STAND):** 1,441(w) x 833(h) x 115.9(d)mm **WEIGHT (OFF STAND):** 28.2kg

FEATURES: USB and DLNA multimedia playback; built-in Wi-Fi; HDR+ HDR upscaling engine; smart system; Netflix and Amazon 4K apps; direct LED lighting with Precision Black Pro local dimming; Quantum Dot technology; curved screen with Moth Eye anti-reflection; external connections box

A few final ticks in the UE65KS9500's box are its smart system (the Eden interface still holds up well, and covers all the main video streaming and catch-up TV bases, including HDR and 4K support where a service provides it), and its external connections box, which makes for a tidy installation, particularly if you aren't switching sources through an AV receiver.

What's not so good about it?

While a genuine wonder of its time, the UE65KS9500 won't be for everyone, and a chief consideration is its curved screen.

Curved displays were all the rage a couple of years ago, not so much these days, and this Samsung is a fine example of where the design falters. The curved screen exaggerates reflections from additional light sources – problematic during daylight hours, or if there's a lamp in your room in an unfortunate position. It also causes slight colour banding with some very extreme HDR content (though you can manage this to acceptable levels with careful adjustment of its dynamic contrast and local dimming controls), and the effect of the curve on screen-wide horizontal lines (the ticker-tape on a news channel, for example) can be vaguely distracting.

Also, while this TV supports the broadcast-friendly HLG, industry standard HDR10 and the new HDR10+ HDR formats, it doesn't support Dolby Vision. This limitation has become enough of an issue in recent times (with the launch of Dolby Vision on the new Apple TV set-top box, a growing number of 4K Blu-rays, and Netflix) that I've now partnered the UE65KS9500 with a Dolby Vision-capable LG OLED. This is a solution for me, but I appreciate not for almost everyone else.

Should I buy it?

If you can find a good-condition model on the secondhand market or in a retailer's store cupboard, it's worth investigating. Yes, I sometimes rue its curved screen and lack of Dolby Vision playback (and absence of 3D, too), but it's still a premium performer, demonstrating the eye-catching benefits of 4K, HDR and wide colour visuals without technology-borne distraction. It remains more than a match for anything newer the TV market has shown us so far ■

1. The KS9500 uses a 150-zone locally dimmed LED backlight

2. In 2016, you had to go curved to get Samsung's premium display technology

HCC VERDICT

★★★★★

Samsung UE65KS9500

→ £2,000 (approx, second-hand) → www.samsung.co.uk

WE SAY: Aside from not being flat and not supporting Dolby Vision, the UE65KS9500 remains the best TV I've seen at showing you everything HDR and 4K has to offer.



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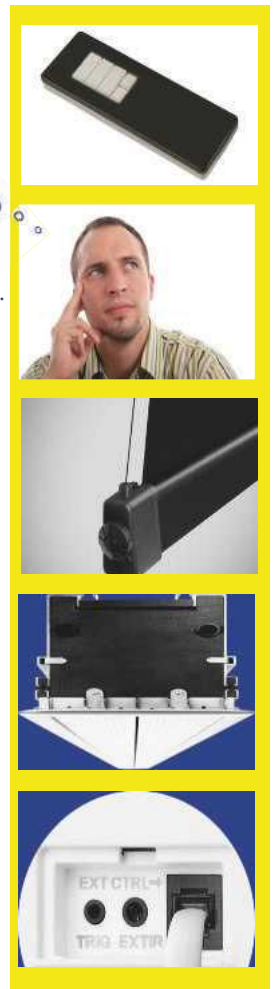
For when only the best will do ...



Imagine if

- * You had a screen that was almost invisible to visitors until in use. When you finish viewing the trap door closes magically to hide the fabric.
- * If the motor and the structure was designed to be whisper quiet.
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Digital Copy

A hard drive error message has **Mark Craven** worrying about his haphazard approach to buying discs, chucking out DVDs and gorging on PVR'd movies

I KNOW FROM the readers' rooms we feature in this magazine that many of you have extensive disc collections, lovingly housed in wall-length cabinets (or mock Egyptian sarcophagi...), often arranged in alphabetical (or some other order).

I'll admit to being envious. My own disc collection is rather more higgledy-piggledy.

Most attention and care is given to my Blu-ray and Ultra HD Blu-ray library, housed on custom-built shelves and occasionally arranged in something approaching a sensible order. I say 'occasionally' because after the sixth or seventh time of removing *Edge of Tomorrow* to demo its drop-ship sequence, it doesn't always end up in the same place. More simply, I keep formats separate, and music and TV show platters away from movies.

My DVD library (barring some TV series boxsets that will never appear on Blu-ray) is housed in my garage, on shelving units between the power tools and boxes of cables. This week I went out to do a stock-check and say goodbye to some titles, after realising that, considering there are discs here still in cellophane wrappers more than 10 years old (*The Punisher*, starring Thomas Jane and John Travolta is one example), they might be better off donated to a charity shop and then **owned by someone with the actual intention of watching them**.

It's an odd mix, my DVD collection. There are obvious sections – Denzel Washington movies, Jason Statham movies – surrounded by random flicks, circa 2001-2006, and some back-catalogue classics. It transpires that I actually own a good proportion of these now on Blu-ray, so out they go.

Back in the house, in a cupboard in my office, is a hoard of Blu-ray check discs – artwork-free,

box-free platters sent as pre-release review samples. Some of my favourite flicks can be found here, but they're an uncatalogued mess.

I'm telling you all this because a recent event got me thinking about where (and how) I store my movies. The event was a close call with my PVR hard drive. I booted up to watch TV, only to be met with a frankly terrifying message saying 'No Hard Disk'. Terrifying, because I don't use my Sky Q HDD to simply time-shift soap operas; I treat it as an extension of my disc library.

There are dozens of movies sitting on my HDD that I'm yet to watch, or watch all the way through. These run from *The Great Escape*, *Amistad* and *Groundhog Day* in Ultra HD, to the 2010 historical actioner *Centurion* and 1982's musical *Annie*. I even record films that I know I own on DVD (such as Tony Scott's *Domino*, pictured) because... well, they're stuffed far away in the garage, aren't they?

When I thought my HDD had failed (thankfully, it hadn't – I think my PVR just needed a breather), all these unwatched classic (and not-so-classic) movies flashed before my eyes. I was worried I'd lost them, despite never actually owning them.

I've therefore resolved to do three things. Firstly, to make an effort to view movies I've recorded sooner rather than later. Secondly, to catalogue all my BDs and DVDs and check discs, so I can finally get a grasp on what I own and what I don't own but would like to. And, thirdly, to make sure my household contents insurance is up to date. If the prospect of losing a few digital downloads of vintage movies can send me into a panic, I'm not sure how I'd react if all my physical platters were ruined 'cos my water pipes burst... ■

*How is your movie collection organised?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Mark Craven was alarmed this month to discover he owns 1990s sitcom *2point4 Children* on DVD, and it appears to have been watched





Film Fanatic

With a lengthy family visit on the cards this festive season, **Anton van Beek** gets busy thinking up a list of alternate Christmas movies that may just tickle everyone's fancies...

THIS COMING CHRISTMAS promises to be quite a momentous one for the Film Fanatic household. Previously, myself and Mrs van Beek have either enjoyed a quiet holiday by ourselves or taken the opportunity to visit one or other set of parents. This time around we are throwing open the doors to our home and having my parents stay with us for an entire week. Sounds like the start of a Will Ferrell comedy, doesn't it?

Presents have already been bought and wrapped, and as my parents will be arriving on Boxing Day, we won't even have to bother cooking twice as much as we usually do for Christmas dinner. Job done, right? Not at all.

For myself, there's still the most important thing of all to deal with: choosing the films that we'll be watching during their visit. After all, you definitely don't want to get caught unprepared when somebody asks what flick to stick on. Do that and you risk taking too long to choose. **The next thing you know you're stuck watching the *Call the Midwife* Christmas special.**

However, my Film Fanatic reputation means that I can't just sit back and throw together a bunch of the usual suspects. Our guests will be expecting something a little more considered and unexpected from me than simply spinning up *Elf*, *White Christmas* or *It's a Wonderful Life* on Blu-ray. But where to begin?

Well, as everyone enjoys a good chuckle, comedy seems like the obvious area in which to begin my quest. Sadly, the sheer amount of profanity and general rudery packed into its relatively modest running time counts out my personal favourite *Bad Santa* or its 2016 sequel. Thankfully, there's another drunken Santa I can always rely on to raise a smile – the side-splitting scene from *Trading Places*

where Dan Ackroyd's down-and-out commodities broker crashes his former employer's Christmas party dressed as the jolly fat man.

As far as messages go, what could possibly be more Christmassy than watching those born with a silver spoon in their mouths get what's coming to them? Charles Dickens would surely approve.

Festive frights and firefights

Speaking of Mr Dickens, at the other end of the emotional scale there's the long tradition of festive frights that dates back at least as far as the 1843 publication of his *A Christmas Carol* – and cinema has served up no end of holiday scares of its own.

Still, I'm not sure that seasonal slashers *Black Christmas* and *Silent Night, Deadly Night* would go down well with this particular audience. Rather, now's the time to pick something a little more playful, and with *Gremlins* being too obvious, the next logical option is Michael Dougherty's *Krampus* (pictured) with its delicious mix of festive cheer and gleefully nasty monsters.

When it comes to action movies there are no shortage of possibilities, ranging from *Die Hard* (Christmas Eve hostage crisis!) to *Rocky IV* (Christmas Day boxing bout!). But as far as I'm concerned it would be unthinkable to not include at least one Shane Black film on a list of Christmas movies – after all, the man is clearly obsessed with this time of year. So I'll be relying on *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* and *Iron Man 3* to bring some festive firepower to my home cinema and wake us all up from the inevitable food and drink-induced coma.

If none of that appeals, my parents can hog the TV and I'll head out to watch *The Last Jedi* again ■

*What are your favourite Christmas movies?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

It's good to see that not even **Anton van Beek** is cruel enough to make his parents sit through *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*.





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Jon Thompson says a fly in the 4K Blu-ray ointment concerns incorrect metadata values, and bemoans the fact this means he ends up watching everything twice



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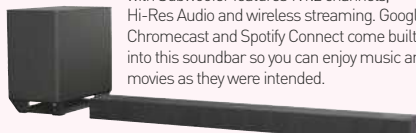
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Feedback

Got an axe to grind? Need to comment on current tech? Want to share your knowledge with our readers? **Team HCC** is here to help

New TV + BD deck = happy

Just wanted to fill you in on a recent upgrade of my AV system. I've made the jump to 4K HDR and I'm loving it.

This Summer I replaced a 55in Samsung LED TV (Full HD) with a 55in LG OLED (B7) and swapped my old Blu-ray player for a Panasonic DMP-UB400. The cost of this upgrade was around £2,000, and I've moved the old Samsung set into a bedroom where it still does the job, rather than try and sell it secondhand (the market for old TVs doesn't get you much, I've discovered!).

The LG is a great TV. Black levels are superb and 4K material really does look super-sharp, and the 4K Panasonic player is great considering how cheap it is. I'm now buying (nearly) all my new discs on 4K Blu-ray and have some new demo favourites (*The Great Wall*, *Deepwater Horizon*, *Planet Earth II*, etc.).

My only gripe is that some movies are still not being made available on 4K Blu-ray for us UK buyers when they are being sold in the US. *Martin*

Mark Craven replies: I've had a quick look on eBay to scope out the current secondhand TV



LG's B7 – a master of the dark arts

market, and you're right – from a seller's perspective it looks a bit grim! Many used 4K models are going at bargain prices, let alone Full HD sets. There's not a massive array of choice there, though (a lot of sets appear to be broken/faulty), suggesting many people are choosing to hold on to old models for second-room use, as you have done. Retaining

packaging, arranging delivery, etc., of an old TV is, I imagine, quite a pain.

And good to hear you're enjoying your 4K upgrade. Keep us posted!

Anton van Beek replies: Yes, there is a noticeable disparity between the UK and US release slates of 4K titles – Disney's *Pirates of*

Run to see Blade Runner!

Mark Craven says he hasn't watched *Blade Runner 2049* yet [Digital Copy, HCC #279] but if he wants my opinion, it's definitely a film worth seeing on the biggest screen possible! The VFX and cinematography look amazing. I for one can't wait for the 4K BD release.

As for the question of intermissions, I don't think modern cinema audiences would appreciate a movie stopping halfway through, and it would lead to more sounds of popcorn being munched after everyone getting a second bag from the concessions stand during the break. So I don't mind no intermissions and I don't mind 'long' films either.

Anthony

Mark Craven replies: I'm hoping *Blade Runner 2049* could be a picture quality demo disc – it certainly seems to be less visually drab than Denis Villeneuve's last flick, *Arrival*...



Blade Runner 2049 has been a hit with IMAX fans

the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales (reviewed on p105 from a US import) being a fresh example. It would seem to me that studios have decided the UK market isn't sizable enough to justify mirrored disc releases with the US, as there are of course additional costs regarding disc replication, distribution, packaging, etc. Perhaps if the titles weren't region-free they would feel differently. Film fans have got what they wished for (no region coding) but it might now be the reason for less content on shop shelves!

Where is the Love?

Hi. You can add me to the list of disgruntled Lovefilm subscribers. I have been using the service for years and, like your other readers, found it a great way of watching movies without having to first pay the retail price for a disc. Films that I really enjoyed then got added to my 'buy on Blu-ray' list.

Amazon's decision to close the service is therefore really annoying, although I understand that media streaming means that there may not be a large enough market of physical disc fans for it to be kept going.

I have used Netflix in the past but found the film selection to be average. I won't consider Sky Movies through a Now TV box or other such services because I want the full surround sound experience and best picture quality.

I guess now I will have to rely on only buying discs for movies that I know are going to be great, rather than taking a risk!

Simon

Pure Audio pricing is a joke

Watcha guys. I've been having a look on the interweb (Amazon) to see if there are any updates on new rock Blu-ray Pure Audio discs worth spending my money on. Shock, horror! I did find Queen's *A Night at the Opera* and The Who's *Tommy*.

My excitement was suddenly taken away when I saw the price of each disc. I have included a screenshot of each item [one featured below] because I don't think you would believe me if they were not included. I don't know if it's the record company that decides on the price or Amazon but why are they stopping the fans of these bands who enjoy listening to these discs in hi-res from buying them? What a joke!

Lee



★ Star Letter...

Bundled Blu-rays aren't bad!

Hi. I must take exception to the letter about 'Superfluous Blu-rays' in HCC #279.

Blu-rays were introduced in 2006 but I didn't buy a Blu-ray player until 2009. At that time, Blu-rays were packaged by Disney along with a copy of a DVD. That meant that I could enjoy the DVD but futureproof my purchase with the inclusion of a Blu-ray.

I don't yet own a 4K Blu-ray player so I am glad to be able to purchase a UHD Blu-ray disc with a copy of the standard Blu-ray included.

The combined UHD packages cost between £20 to £25, whereas a standard Blu-ray retails at £10 to £15.

Although the inclusion of a standard Blu-ray may seem superfluous to someone that already owns a UHD Blu-ray player, to me it is good value for money as I can futureproof a standard Blu-ray purchase at a cost of only £10.

Alan

Mark Craven replies: A very interesting point Alan. A UHD/1080p combi release does indeed cater for future adopters, saving you money on later purchases – as long as the studios don't subsequently



re-issue all those 4K discs with new-fangled HDR encodes beyond HDR10...

And there's another bonus of having a Full HD, SDR copy bundled with a 4K disc: it gives 4K TV owners a chance to run their own simple A/B comparisons between the old format and the new one. Don't believe the marketing hype – simply shootout the 4K reissue of *Close Encounters of a Third Kind* with its previous BD outing to see exactly what you're getting.

Star letter-writer Alan grabs a copy of *Better Call Saul: Season Three* on Blu-ray, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. Continuing to explore the trials and tribulations of criminal lawyer Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk), the third season of this critically-acclaimed *Breaking Bad* spin-off is now available to own on DVD and Blu-ray both as a standalone release and as part of a *Better Call Saul: Complete Seasons One-Three* boxset.

Mark Craven replies: Well, the prices in question are £99.99 for the *Tommy* disc and, erm, £521 for *A Night at the Opera*, so I can see why you're a bit miffed.

However, both those titles that you've found are being sold secondhand, via Amazon, by a private seller. The prices haven't therefore been set by Amazon or the studio (Universal Music) – it's someone trying their luck. So why the high price? Because these titles (released around four years ago now) have been discontinued, so sellers now feel they can set whatever price and see if anyone bites. You can by all means keep on hunting online, looking at other marketplaces in the UK and beyond, but don't get your hopes up where a Pure Audio Blu-ray is concerned.

Do you own a DVD-Audio player?

You might want to instead look for the Queen title on that format, as it was released back in the DVD-A heyday, and can be found for a lot less than £521...

Upgrade my Pana TV?

I was browsing through the internet and came across a page saying it was possible to upgrade my Panasonic TV to HDR (802b

model). But hold on a minute, it's complete gobbledegook to me what I need to do...

Is there any easy guide that you could suggest to doing this as I reckon it will save me buying a new TV. I've bought a memory stick, all I need now is instructions, as Panasonic's are a disaster.

Andrew

Mark Craven replies: It's not clear exactly which model number you are referring to Andrew, but I'm assuming you mean the CX802 series (launched in 2015). A previous AX802 lineup (launched in 2014) included 4K panels, but not HDR support. The still-current DX802 range (launched in 2016) featured HDR out of the box. If you do own an AX802 TV, and are hoping to upgrade it to HDR, then you'll be disappointed.

Anyway, the CX802 series (50in, 55in and 65in variants) was given an HDR update at the same time (June 2016) as Panasonic's CR852 OLED displays, a surprisingly long wait for owners of the set.

The process for performing the upgrade is detailed on Panasonic's website. First, head to the 'Support' section of the CX802 page (www.panasonic.com/uk/consumer/televisions/4KTV/tx-50cx802b.html), and

then click on the link for 'How do I upgrade my television for HDR content'. This takes you to a separate webpage, and here you'll need to click the link 'HDR update'. This then takes you to an interactive walkthrough of the process.

This may be what you describe as 'gobbledygook', as it is fairly technical, but the basic first steps are clicking on the link to download the update file (labelled SDDL SEC), copying this file to a USB stick (which you've bought) and making sure that it isn't placed in any 'folder' on the stick, then plugging the stick into the 'USB 1' port on your Panasonic TV (with the TV switched on).

(In addition to this, make sure your TV has the latest over-the-air firmware update running. A new firmware was pushed in the days leading up to the USB file being made available – although as that was around 14 months ago now, there will almost certainly have been more).

The TV will then ask if you want to download the update file from the USB. Click 'OK', then 'Yes' (when it asks a second time...) and wait for your TV to power off and then restart. After this, you then need to go to your TV's menus (press MENU on the TV handset), scroll down to Setup, then down to HDMI HDR Setting, and switch the HDMI input that you have an HDR source (4K player, console, etc) connected to, to 'On' rather than 'Off'.

This, says Panasonic, is the process in full. It's not something we've performed on a CX802 ourselves, however, so if any readers that own this set have successfully updated it, please get in touch.

Does size matter?

My current AV setup is (in parts) a decade old – Sony KDL-40X2000, PS3, BT YouView box (4K – thought I would futureproof there for when I get a TV good enough for it),



Panasonic's CX802 – HDR-enabled, eventually

Onkyo TX-SR607 and a Sony DVD player and KEF HTS5001.2 package. I'm looking to get a new TV in either the pre- or post-Christmas sales (and upgrade other bits later) and had a question about some of the reviews.

Where you review a model, does the score remain the same for other sizes in the same model range? I'm looking at a 55in – if I see a review of a larger size will it be the same?
Trevor

Mark Craven replies: Different-sized TVs in a range generally have the same specification and feature set, and comparable performance (bar the issue raised of a different screen size, of course). However, it's not unusual for

some differences to occur – larger panels may be from an entirely different vendor, for instance, and can also vary in bit-depth (8-bit or 10-bit). Furthermore, you may even find the same TV series mixing IPS and VA panel designs, which will have a noticeable impact on performance. So never assume that, for instance, a 49in and 65in TV from the same range are identical. Check the manufacturer's specs!

It's Zimmer time!

Saw the snippet about the HCC office wearing out their copy of *John Carpenter's Anthology* [HCC #279] and I can't say I've laid my hands on it (yet) but I did manage to get a hold of *John Carpenter's Lost Themes*, which instantly transported me back to the mid-1980s. Great music for the dark, early-morning trips to work!

However, John Carpenter aside, I have three little words for the good people at HCC...

Hans Zimmer Live in Prague ...er, on Blu-ray. Okay, more like six or seven words but I've almost knackered my copy out inside of a week. As well as a high-definition visual treat for the eyes, I defy anyone not to stick *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Dark Knight* or the *Inception* suites on repeat!

Ian Forster ■

Contact us...

Write to HCC, AV Tech Media Ltd, Suite 25, Eden House, Enterprise Way, Edenbridge, Kent, TN8 6HF, or email us at letters@homecinemachoice.com
Please note: we cannot guarantee to print/answer all the letters we receive. Sorry.



WIN! Great Blu-rays up for grabs...

Just email your answer to Competitions@homecinemachoice.com to be in with a chance to win

Game of Thrones: The Complete Seventh Season

Get ready for the most action-packed and dramatic season of *Game of Thrones* so far when the seventh season of the smash hit HBO fantasy series comes to DVD and Blu-ray on December 11. To mark the release, we've joined forces with HBO Home Entertainment and have five copies of the new Blu-ray up for grabs!

Question:

Which English actress plays Arya Stark in *Game of Thrones*?

Answer:

- A) Sophie Turner B) Gwendoline Christie
C) Maisie Williams

Email your answer with '*Game of Thrones*' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Atomic Blonde

This sleek and stylish Cold War action-thriller is available to own on digital from December 2, followed by DVD, Blu-ray and 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray

on December 11, courtesy of Universal Pictures Home Entertainment. To be in with a chance of winning one of five Blu-rays, simply answer the following...

Question:

Who stars as MI6 secret agent Lorraine Broughton in *Atomic Blonde*?

Answer:

- A) Charlotte Rampling B) Charlize Theron
C) Sharleen Spiteri

Email your answer with '*Atomic Blonde*' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



The Hitman's Bodyguard

This laugh-out-loud action-comedy starring Samuel L. Jackson and Ryan Reynolds explodes onto 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD,

Digital HD and VOD on December 11, courtesy of Lionsgate Home Entertainment UK. To celebrate, we've got five *The Hitman's Bodyguard* Blu-rays to be won!

Question:

Which of the following superheroes has Ryan Reynolds *not* played on the bigscreen?

Answer:

- A) Deadpool B) Green Lantern
C) Superman

Email your answer with '*Hitman's Bodyguard*' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!



Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets

Take a trip beyond your imagination with director Luc Besson's spectacular sci-fi film, which is available

now to own on 4K Ultra HD Blu-ray, 3D Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD and Digital HD. Thanks to Lionsgate Home Entertainment UK we have five Blu-rays to give away...

Question:

Luc Besson directed which of the following numerically-minded movies?

Answer:

- A) *The Fourth Protocol* B) *The Fifth Element*
C) *The Sixth Sense*

Email your answer with '*Valerian*' as the subject heading – and don't forget to include your postal address!

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- The editor's decision is final.
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- The closing date is January 4, 2018.

Certified: AV-Holic!

HCC reader **Chris** has revamped nearly his entire cinema setup to embrace 4K projection and 3D audio. Here he guides us through his kit choices, demo discs and why he has three screens...



Ridley Scott's *The Martian*: one of our reader's top five flicks



Welcome to the AV-Holics Hall of Fame – again. Introduce yourself!

I'm Chris England, and I'm aged 48. I work as an IT Marketing & Business Development Director.

You've had a massive overhaul of your movie room since you featured in HCC #220 – so what's new?

My goal was to go full 4K with Atmos/DTS:X on a 5.2.4 bi-amped setup but have a choice of two projector screens: 16:9 for the content that needs it (*Avatar*, *Transformers*, *Dark Knight*, *Star Trek Into Darkness*, *Planet Earth II*, etc), plus a massive 3m-wide 2.35:1 screen for movies that use that format. I also wanted proper blackout blinds, all fully automated.

I have been wanting this for a long while but alas I had to stop working in March 2015

due to a rare cancer – this setup has helped me on my road to recovery!

The only items that survived the upgrade (apart from me) were the Grandview 16:9 Cyberscreen projector screen; Monitor Audio AW12 subwoofer (now used as a second sub); power and speaker cables; Sony PlayStation 4 (but I'm now considering a PS4 Pro); and the amazing Spectral Catena floating cabinets that are still superb.

My new system uses a Sony VPL-VW360ES projector, the aforementioned Grandview screen, and a new Vutec Letric 1 RF 129in (2.35:1-ratio) screen. In addition, I now have an LG OLED65B7 TV (65in, 4K).

Speakers are KEF Ci5160RL-THX in-wall models for left (bi-amped), right (bi-amped) and centre; four KEF Ci200RR-THX in-ceiling Atmos units; Monitor Audio Gold FX on-wall rears; REL S5 SHO subwoofer; and the Monitor Audio AW12. Driving these is an Arcam AVR850 receiver, with Dirac EQ, and an Arcam P429 power amplifier for the Atmos channels.

Sources are an Oppo UDP-205 Ultra HD Blu-ray player, Apple TV (4K) and VirginMedia TiVo V6 (also 4K).

For the run to the projector I'm using an AudioQuest 15m HDMI cable; other cables are Chord Sarsen speaker cable, Chord Shawline 1m phono interconnects, and AudioQuest HDMI and optical cables.

System control is via an iPad Mini 4 and RTI controller/remote.

It was hard to say goodbye to my Pioneer KRP-600A after our eight-year romance, but she went to a good new home and is still going strong!

Did you do the installation yourself, or get help from professionals?

As on my original custom install in 2009 and a follow-on upgrade in 2013, Sevenoaks Sound & Vision (Reading) provided all the expertise and help on planning and installation as well as calibrating the sound with Dirac.



Chris can view films on his 4K OLED TV, or 16:9 and 2.35:1 ratio screens



Monitor Audio Gold FX are used as surround speakers in the 5.2.4 array



I cannot recommend them highly enough. They are incredibly skilled and experienced at integrating and making new technology sing in harmony together. Any issues with vendors' equipment were dealt with promptly, with solutions delivered to my custom requirements. Their depth of knowledge is invaluable and I've learnt a lot from them!

How long did it take?

Installation, configuration and optimisation took five days.

What's your verdict on the cinema's performance?

The new KEF speakers look gorgeous and sound... beautiful. Of course, I thought the system sounded great until the Sevenoaks team did the Dirac calibration and – wow – it was like a new system and the original sound was just flat in comparison. Dirac made an incredible difference and it's something I'd highly recommend after experiencing it. It gives an amazing lift to the overall immersive experience. Having a second subwoofer has added depth but I may need a new roof soon.

The PS4 is incredible with the Arcam and KEF setup – amazing resolution images and surround sound!

I went out and grabbed a ton of Ultra HD Blu-ray discs – *Planet Earth II*, *The Martian*, *Passengers*, *The Mummy*, *Wonder Woman*, *Transformers: The Last Knight*, *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Arrival*, *Everest*, *Star Trek*, *Man of Steel*, *Jupiter Ascending*, *Oblivion*, *Terminator Genisys*, *Prometheus*, *Apollo 13*, *Blade Runner* and more – plus I pre-ordered a few more as you do. I've not watched them



Our AV-Holic called upon his local Sevenoaks Sound & Vision branch for kit installation and system calibration



The makeover included accommodation of four KEF Ci200RR-THX in-ceiling speakers for Atmos/DTS:X sonics, powered by an Arcam P429

all yet but *Terminator Genisys* and *Man of Steel* were stunning in every way. For a non-Atmos disc, *Prometheus* is incredible. *Wonder Woman*, *Passengers*, *The Martian* and *Oblivion* are superb. *Apollo 13* was like a new movie again.

And what's your view on 4K HDR?

When it works, great, but there are still lots of interoperability issues with all the components that the industry needs to get better at! I think HDCP 2.2 needs more work across mixed devices.

What's your favourite bit of kit, and why?

My favourite bit of kit... is hard to say. The RTI control has grown on me a lot, but the Arcam/KEF/Sony combo is killer.

Initially I was sceptical about an installer-controlled RTI remote, but it is truly awesome. It's so easy to manage everything. Even my non-AV technophobe wife loves it! The way it automates everything to work, with the correct screen, is impressive.

Do you already have your eye on more upgrades?

Yes, and one you might not expect – an anamorphic lens from Panamorph to do native 4K full resolution with no dark-bar light-leak on my 2.35:1 screen.

What are your Top 5 favourite flicks?

Passengers, *The Martian*, *Star Trek Into Darkness*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Spectre* (wish they'd do the Bond movies on 4K soon – if they add HDR and Atmos to this it could be the best disc going!). And can I add *Blues Brothers* as a sixth?

What movies/discs do you use to show off your system?

As said, *Man of Steel* is excellent, as is *Oblivion*, *Terminator Genisys* and *Apollo 13* – the takeoff



Discs and hardware are housed in Spectral Catena cabinets



A REL S5 SHO is a new addition...



... as is a Sony VPL-VW360ES

scene in the latter is my benchmark demo every upgrade.

Transformers: The Last Knight is stunning in 4K. The intro sequence to *Baby Driver* is awesome on Apple TV and once I get the 4K Blu-ray I can see that being a new demo, too.

Do you stream movies/TV from Netflix/Amazon/Sky etc?

Yes, Apple TV 4K and Netflix 4K.

How often do you settle down for movie night?

Two or three times a week, with a bottle of wine!

What do friends and family think of the cinema?

They're blown away by the quality of the sound and the picture depth – we're now the local movie house in our road... ■

Share your cinema system in the mag!

If you want to be in **HCC**, you'll need to send us some hi-res images of your cinema room. Here are a few tips...

1. Go big. Set your camera to take images at the largest possible size, and at the highest resolution. Don't worry about cropping or resizing – we will make them print-ready.
2. Get in focus. Make sure your photos are as sharp and clear as possible. If you have one, use a tripod, or place your camera on a flat, steady surface and take pictures on a delay. The sharper they are, the bigger we can print them.
3. Let some light in. While we tend to watch

- movies in the dark, our cinema systems look their best when they are lit. If you can shoot with natural daylight, do so. If your room doesn't get a lot of light (a garage conversion, for instance) then switch on whatever lights are fitted. Avoid using flash wherever possible.
4. Be thorough. Send photos of as much of the room as possible. Images of both the front and back of the room, the kit rack, speakers, seating, disc shelf, movie poster art... The more the merrier.

5. Don't be shy. Send a picture of yourself!
6. Show us more. Got pictures of your room before it was a cinema? Or snaps of work being done? We love to see these, too.

Now what?

Email your images to **letters@homecinemachoice.com** with the subject heading 'AV-Holic', and provide your answers to the relevant questions above – then we'll be in touch!



SERIE T/i



T/7i (left) shows proprietary Arrow™ zero compression wireless connector upper corner.
T/9i (right) features new Fiberallay™ ultra-fast driver.

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PLAYBACK

→ **SOFTWARE HIGHLIGHTS** **SPIDER-MAN: HOMECOMING** Marvel's webslinger is back in action again **ATOMIC BLONDE** Fun with girls and guns **VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS 3D** Stereoscopic sci-fi spectacular **WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES** Monkeying around on Ultra HD BD **ANNABELLE: CREATION** The demonic doll returns! & MORE!

The iceman cometh...

Game of Thrones: The Complete Seventh Season
→ HBO → All-region BD

As the long-prophesied Winter arrives, so things finally start to heat up in the penultimate season of the hit fantasy saga. Find out if it has all been worth the wait as we take the latest *Game of Thrones* Blu-ray boxset for a spin on p98.

HCC RATINGS KEY...

Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★
Acceptable	★★★
Disappointing	★★
Dire	★

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

Valerian wondered if he'd
overdone the fake tan this time...



Spaced-out space oddity

French filmmaker Luc Besson is in his element with this wild and wonderful space opera



→ VALERIAN AND THE CITY OF A THOUSAND PLANETS 3D

Based on the popular French comic book series *Valérian and Laureline* (1967-2010), Luc Besson's long-awaited return to outer space is a madcap explosion of imagination and spectacle that serves up more weird aliens and gimmicks than all of the *Star Wars* films combined.

Even more so than Besson's previous foray into the genre with *The Fifth Element*, this vibrant sci-fi blockbuster perfectly captures that uniquely European comic book style and sensibility in a way that Hollywood still struggles to do with its homegrown efforts.

Add to that a compellingly crazy story with an effective sting in the tail, and decent lead performances from Dane DeHaan and Cara Delevigne as cocky space agents Valerian and Laureline, and you have an enjoyably psychedelic slice of space opera that really stands apart from the competition.

Of course, the film bombed at the box office, meaning that we'll probably never get to see any more of the duo's *Barbarella*-esque adventures adapted for the bigscreen.

Picture: *Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets* paints the screen with an explosion

of bright and richly saturated primary colours. While some may decry this as looking 'fake', it reflects the look of the comic perfectly and makes a refreshing change from the duller tones that characterise the palettes of so many movies these days.

In addition to the superb 2D presentation, this UK release also includes a second Blu-ray housing the 3D version of the film. Despite being converted in post, Besson shot the film specifically with 3D in mind, and it's full of spectacular shots, such as those tracking through a market (Chapter 3), or Valerian's chase through the various areas of the Alpha station (Chapter 6), that really play to the strengths of the stereoscopic format.

Audio: Both presentations of the film feature the same Dolby Atmos soundtrack, and the soundstage it creates is expansive and dynamic, with excellent

steering and precise imaging. Our only small complaint is that while height channel effects are convincing, they aren't quite as pervasive as the film content might demand.

Extras: Curiously, the distributor has dropped the branching 'Enhancement Mode' from this UK release, but all 14 of the 'Enhancement Pod' mini featurettes are still available to view independently of the film.

Also included on the 2D platter are an hour-long, five-part behind-the-scenes documentary and a gallery of production art.

HCC VERDICT

Valerian and the City of a Thousand Planets 3D

→ Lionsgate → Region B BD
→ £25

WE SAY: Let's hope that Besson's stylish and imaginative sci-fi flop finds the audience it deserves on BD.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Batman vs. Two-FaceWarner Bros. → All-region BD
£17

Following the success of last year's agreeable *Batman: The Return of the Caped Crusader*, this second (and, following the death earlier this year of Adam West, presumably final) animated follow-up to the classic '60s TV show is an altogether more successful outing, thanks in no small part to William Shatner's suitably scenery-chewing turn as the eponymous villain. The stylish animation is aided immensely by a crisp and colourful 1.78:1 Full HD encode, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 audio works wonders with the film's voice acting and Foley effects. Extras include a trio of interviews and a panel discussion.

**Fear the Walking Dead: Season Three**Entertainment One → Region B BD
£45

Now here's a pleasant surprise. Following two increasingly frustrating seasons, the third year of this spin-off series not only sees it finally developing a voice of its own, but also delivering a more satisfying storyline than its parent show has managed recently. This UK Blu-ray adheres to the template laid down by the previous seasons, spreading its 16 attractively-rendered episodes across four Full HD platters. A fifth disc houses a 66-min reel of *Inside the Episodes* behind-the-scenes vignettes and a pair of three-minute promo featurettes.

**Legion: The Complete Season One**Twentieth Century Fox → Region B BD
£35

It would appear that the success of *Deadpool* has encouraged Fox to keep on experimenting with the superhero genre; hence this surreal and visually arresting televisual foray into the *X-Men* universe from *Fargo* showrunner Noah Hawley. As well as being brilliantly written and beautifully acted, *Legion* is cinematic in a way that only a handful of other TV shows have ever managed – and as you'd hope, this results in a superb series of Blu-ray encodes. Backing up the gorgeous 1080p visuals are dynamic DTS-HD MA 5.1 soundscapes. Indeed, our only gripe is the rather modest array of extras.



There's life in the old doll yet

This second origin story for *The Conjuring's* demonic doll is horribly entertaining**→ ANNABELLE: CREATION**

The creepy doll from *The Conjuring* is back and the good news is that this new movie represents a vast step up in quality over the previous solo outing.

Dialling back the clock to the 1950s, *Annabelle: Creation* follows six orphans given shelter by a former dollmaker and his bed-ridden wife, who lost their own daughter in a car accident 12 years earlier. All is well for... oh, at least a couple of hours, until one of the orphans sneaks into the dead girl's bedroom and finds a very familiar-looking doll locked away in a wardrobe...

From a purely narrative perspective *Annabelle: Creation* is the very model of a conventional fright flick. What really makes it stand out is director David F. Sandberg, who builds on the promise he showed with last year's *Light's Out* and orchestrates a series of deftly constructed and hair-raising set-pieces that have no difficulty scaring the willies out of viewers. Backing all of that up are some unexpectedly strong and charismatic performances, with youngsters Talitha Bateman and Lulu Wilson (who also starred in the surprisingly enjoyable *Ouija: Origin of Evil*) being particularly worthy of praise.

Picture: *Annabelle: Creation* arrives on Blu-ray with a satisfying 2.40:1 1080p encode. Daylight exteriors are brightly lit and, while not the most intricately detailed visuals you'll ever see, still host plenty of well-refined textures. Meanwhile, the all-important night scenes serve up deep areas of shadow and, while there are hints of crush, the footage retains enough refinement and clarity to ensure that you are always able to follow the onscreen action.



'Once upon a time, there was an evil dolly...'

Audio: It may take 20 minutes or so to really get into its stride, but *Annabelle: Creation's* Dolby Atmos mix is a masterclass in sound design for horror films.

The soundfield regularly benefits from localised effects that will have you looking over your shoulder, while bass support is both tight and incredibly potent. Use of the overhead layer for isolated effects is pretty sporadic, but when deployed they're thrillingly effective and serve only to heighten an already terrifying acoustic experience.

Extras: Handy extras for any aspiring filmmakers include an informative chat-track from David F. Sandberg, a 42-minute video consisting of b-roll footage and Sandberg discussing his process as a director, and a 12-minute featurette exploring how the film was restructured in the editing suite.

Also included are a short look at how the film fits into the wider *Conjuring* cinematic universe and two of the director's earlier spooky shorts.

**HCC VERDICT****Annabelle: Creation**

→ Warner Bros. → All-region BD
→ £25

WE SAY: This superior fright-flick packs a killer Atmos mix and some quality extras on Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Arcade Action

Bigscreen home entertainment isn't just about movies anymore. **Rik Henderson** checks out a videogame vying for time on your home cinema system...



Super Mario Odyssey

Nintendo → Nintendo Switch → £60

Thanks mainly to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, the Nintendo Switch was a huge success on its launch in the Spring. The console regularly sells out as soon as new stock appears in stores, and Nintendo is said to have sold as many units in six months as the Wii U managed in half its lifespan.

However, while the console has been well received, it has been largely starved of stand-out games. *The Legend of Zelda* aside, *Splatoon 2* and *Mario Kart 8* have been the only other must-haves. Switch owners have been waiting with bated breath for something else to justify their purchase of the console.

And here it is. *Super Mario Odyssey* isn't just the best game on the Switch, it's possibly the best game on any console this year.

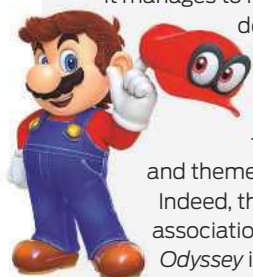
It may be a 3D platformer with a rather hackneyed story, but it contains so many magical examples of superior game design that it brings wonder throughout the campaign. And there are so many puzzles and secrets that you'll happily go back through the multiple open-world levels afterwards just to complete them all.

The biggest and best new gameplay mechanic the game brings to the table comes in the form of Cappy – a sentient hat creature that replaces Mario's trademark cap. He can be thrown to dispatch enemies but, better still, can also be used to take control of many of the in-game denizens. Want to become a Goomba to reach a certain platform? Throw your hat on him. Need to knock down an imposing wall? Throw Cappy onto a T-Rex and stomp through. The options are multitudinous and always delightful.

Super Mario Odyssey also looks fantastic, even though it runs in 900p when the Switch is docked and at 720p in portable mode. That's partly because of the 60 frames per second refresh rate it manages to maintain, and partly because of the great art design and colourfield – who needs HDR when your eyes are already popping?

As with most games produced in-house at Nintendo (including previous Mario outings) the score is also excellent, with the crazy songs and themes that only Japanese games seem to master.

Indeed, that's a particularly apposite word to use in association with Mario's latest adventure as *Super Mario Odyssey* is a masterpiece through and through.



The Wages of Fear

BFI → Region B BD & R2 DVD
£20



Mix together four desperate men, two trucks loaded with volatile nitro-glycerine and one 300-mile journey across treacherous terrain, and you have the ingredients for one

of the greatest suspense thrillers ever committed to celluloid. Henri-Georges Clouzot's 1953 classic arrives on UK Blu-ray courtesy of a new 4K restoration from an original 35mm nitrate negative that blows away the previous Criterion Collection US release. Supporting the film is a series of fascinating interviews and a terrific new commentary from film critic Adrian Martin.



The Philadelphia Story

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD
£28



Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn and James Stewart star in this hilarious 1940 adaptation of the Broadway smash about a wealthy socialite preparing for her second marriage while her

first husband does everything he can to stir up trouble. As the six-minute *Restoration Demonstration* featurette included on the disc goes to show, an incredible amount of effort was put in to bringing *The Philadelphia Story* to Blu-ray – and we're glad to report that the resulting 1.37:1 1080p encode looks absolutely magnificent. Other extras include archival TV interviews and a new documentary about the origins of Hepburn's character.



House of Wax 3D: Premium Collection

Warner Bros → All-region BD & R2 DVD
£15 (HMV exclusive)



Given the declining fortunes of stereoscopic home cinema, it's a pleasant surprise to see this classic 1952 3D horror (a remake of the 1933 chiller *Mystery of the Wax Museum* – included here in SD as a bonus feature) receiving a belated UK release. Despite some instances of ghosting, on the whole the restored 1.37:1 3D image boasts good depth and clarity, and there are plenty of fun 'pop-out' moments to enjoy as well. On top of this, the disc finds space for a chat-track from two film historians, a 48-minute retrospective documentary, a newsreel clip and the trailer.



Charlize Theron has no time for cold-callers at her front door...



Blondes do have more fun

This slick and stylish retro spy thriller gives action cinema a welcome boost of girl power

→ ATOMIC BLONDE

In the weeks leading up to the fall of the Berlin Wall, MI6 operative Lorraine Broughton (Charlize Theron) arrives in the snow-covered city to track down a confidential list of undercover agents before it falls into the wrong hands. Aiding Lorraine in her assignment is eccentric local MI6 agent David Percival (James McAvoy) – although it isn't long before she starts to suspect that he may have his own plans for the list. And where does the mysterious woman (Sofia Boutella) who keeps tailing her everywhere fit into things?

Adapted from Antony Johnston and Sam Hart's 2012 graphic novel *The Coldest City*, this smart spy thriller cements Oscar-winning actress Charlize Theron's newfound position as one of Hollywood's leading action stars. While *Atomic Blonde*'s Cold War storyline is enjoyable enough, it's the action scenes that really make the film stand out – and thanks to the dramatic single-take style preferred by director David (John Wick) Leitch, it's evident that Theron is taking (and dishing out) most of the lumps herself, rather than having stunt doubles do all the heavy lifting.

On the evidence of this film, Hollywood finally has its very own female James Bond. And we'd be very happy for Broughton's bigscreen adventures to continue for however long Theron wants them to.



Picture: Shot digitally and subjected to plenty of post-production colour grading, *Atomic Blonde*'s 2.40:1 palette veers from cool blue exteriors with washed-out blacks to richly-saturated interiors that fill the screen with bold primaries (Chapter 10's nightclub encounter being a prime example of the latter). If the resulting Full HD encode can look a little inconsistent at times when it comes to black levels and detailing, it's undoubtedly true to the source material and is free from encoding-related issues.

Audio: *Atomic Blonde* on BD carries a DTS:X soundtrack that serves up a cornucopia of aggressive and enveloping surround effects (but never straying into unnatural territory), underscored by pleasingly punchy bass. However, for all of its action credentials, where the mix really comes into its own is with the excellent, full-blooded delivery of numerous iconic 1980s pop tunes.

Extras: Accompanying the film are six deleted/extended scenes, a commentary by director David Leitch and editor Elísabet Ronaldsdóttir, two sets of animated storyboards (with optional commentary) and four behind-the-scenes featurettes. Of these, the clear highlight is undoubtedly *Anatomy of a Fight Scene* (eight minutes). Presented in a picture-in-picture style, it offers a fascinating insight into the shooting of the film's unforgettable stairway scrap. ➤



Theron cracked two back teeth while training for the film's fight scenes



HCC VERDICT

Atomic Blonde

→ Universal Pictures → All-region BD → £25

WE SAY: I spy with my little eye an enjoyable Cold War action-thriller handled very well on Blu-ray.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Fantasy saga picks up the pace

Show's shortest season is its most spectacular yet, but time may not be on its side

→ **GAME OF THRONES: THE COMPLETE SEVENTH SEASON**

Now in its penultimate season, HBO's epic fantasy series has moved far beyond where author George R. R. Martin has got to with the source novels and is carving its own path to a suitably big finale.

Perhaps the most surprising thing is that after six seasons of careful build-up, this truncated seventh season sprints through its storylines. As exciting as it is to see so many dangling plot-threads and characters being pulled into place, the downside is that this narrative momentum means that some storylines don't get the attention they deserve and come across as slightly rushed. It also plays havoc with the exact chronology of events being depicted in relation to one another – which, to be fair, has never been one of the show's strong points.

Still, for all of these quibbles, *Game of Thrones* remains one of the most unpredictable and gripping pieces of TV drama around. And with its dragon attacks and forays beyond The Wall, it also serves up the sort of spectacle that could make many Hollywood blockbusters weep with envy.

Picture: Anybody familiar with HBO's previous six *Game of Thrones* Blu-ray releases will already have a good idea what to expect from the 1.78:1 Full HD encodes served up by this three-disc set. The only real difference this time out is that with Winter finally casting its shadow over Westeros, the overall palette of the show veers even cooler and darker than usual. Even so, there are plenty of brighter highlights (like all of that dragon fire) that pop against the cooler tones, and detailing remains as exquisite as ever.



Audio: As with the past few seasons, these episodes arrive on Blu-ray with Dolby Atmos soundtracks (although the discs annoyingly default to alternate Dolby Digital 5.1 mixes). As is so often the case with TV material, much of the focus is on dialogue and general ambience, all of which is well-conveyed.

When the action scenes come (as in Episode Four, Chapter 6's wagon train attack and Episode Six, Chapter 5's battle beyond The Wall) the audio grows in ambition, unleashing thunderous LFE and surrounding the viewer with positional effects. The Atmos height layers adds a tangible vertical dimension to the soundscape.

Extras: Bonuses are commentaries for every episode (even doubling-up on chat-tracks for four of them); an interactive *In-Episode Guide*; a two-part look at the production design; seven more *Histories & Lore* vignettes; and a chat with the cast and crew about the season's key events.



HCC VERDICT

Game of Thrones: The Complete Seventh Season

→ HBO → All-region BD
→ £50

WE SAY: The fantasy saga begins its race to the end with another well-produced Blu-ray boxset.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Girls Trip

Universal Pictures → All-region BD
£25



This year's answer to *Bridesmaids* and *Bad Moms* stars Regina Hall, Jada Pinkett Smith, Tiffany Haddish and

Queen Latifah as four fortysomething friends reuniting for a wild weekend in New Orleans. While *Girls Trip*'s plot is as generic as these things come and the amount of mushy sentiment sometimes threatens to overwhelm everything, the cast (especially breakout star Haddish) bring their 'A' game to the party, ensuring there's plenty of chuckles to be had. This Blu-ray release benefits from glossy 2.40:1 visuals, boisterous DTS-HD MA 5.1 sonics and fun bonus bits.



The Lure

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD
£28



In theory, a musical about flesh-eating mermaids working at a cabaret club in 1980s Warsaw sounds like our

idea of heaven. In reality, however, this episodic Polish film ends up being rather less than the sum of its parts and never hangs together in an entirely satisfactory manner. Those who are lured in to this Blu-ray by the mermaids' siren song will at least enjoy the benefits of the colourful AVC 2.40:1 Full HD encode, while the DTS-HD MA 5.1 mix brings plenty of energy to the musical numbers. Quality extras consist of a 41-minute *Making of...*, six deleted scenes and two short films.



My Cousin Rachel

Twentieth Century Fox → Region B BD
£25



Desire and suspicion are the order of the day in this adaptation of Daphne Du Maurier's novel. Rachel Weisz

stars as the titular cousin to orphan Philip Ashley (Sam Claflin), who he becomes infatuated with whilst also suspecting her of having killed the man who raised him. This gorgeous Gothic thriller cuts a fine figure in Full HD, packing its 2.40:1 frame with plenty of intricate textures despite the low light levels in many interiors, while the lossless 5.1 mix favours atmosphere over dynamics – and does it very well. Extras include 17 deleted scenes, a chat-track and nine short featurettes.



The Villainess

Arrow Video → Region B BD
£20



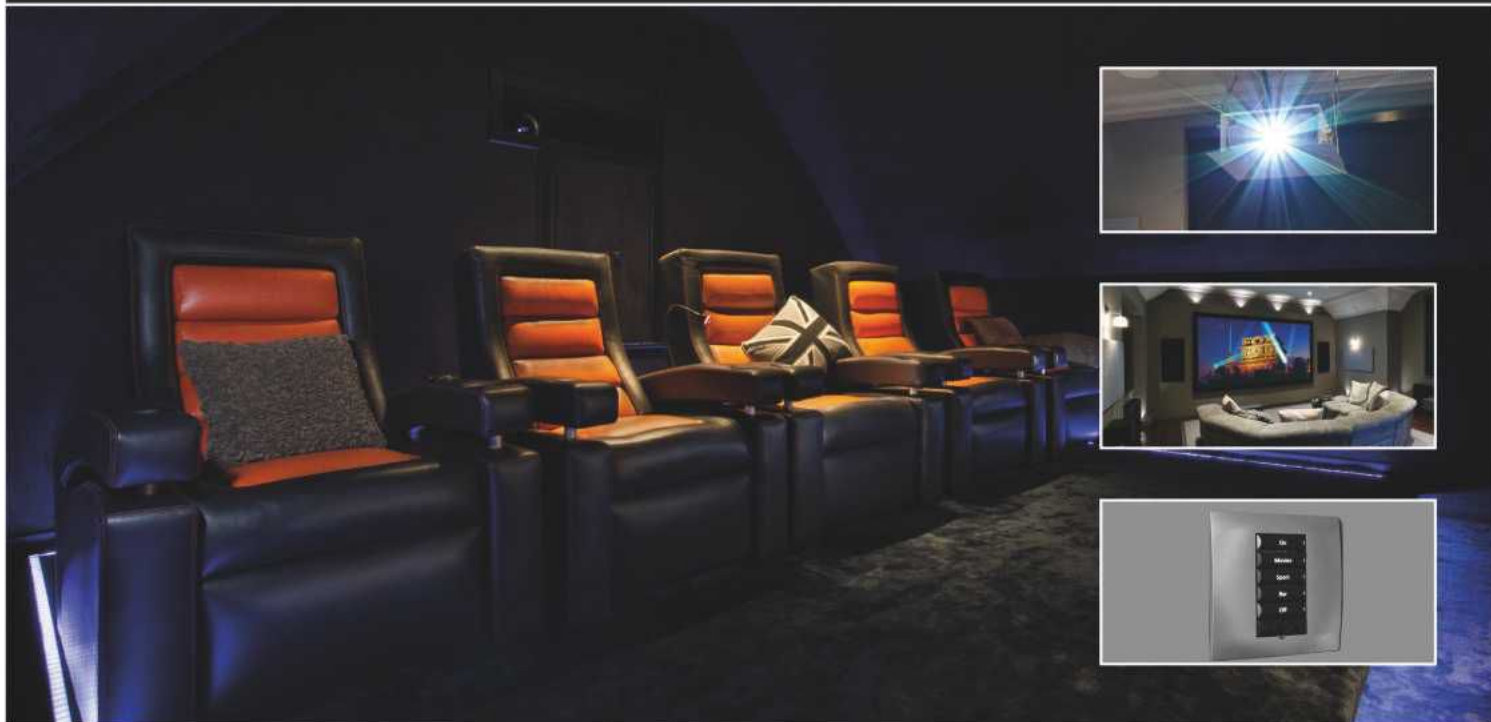
The shadow of Luc Besson's *Nikita* looms large over this South Korean action-thriller about a female criminal

(Kim Ok-bin) who evades prison by being inducted into a secret intelligence agency. Unfortunately, despite an electrifying turn from its leading lady and some kinetic action scenes, the overtly familiar nature of the storyline means that *The Villainess* never lives up to its audacious opening sequence. On a more positive note, this Blu-ray release looks and sounds absolutely sensational. Extras are rather thin on the ground, though, consisting of just a commentary, trailer and booklet.



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Karl was determined to give Megaera a haircut, whether she wanted one or not...



The inessential collection?

These aren't the studio's most famous films, but this glorious boxset still does them proud

→ HAMMER: VOLUME ONE – FEAR WARNING!

Following a lengthy gap with no new UK releases, fans of Hammer Studios' classic output are currently enjoying a Blu-ray bonanza. First came four solo titles from StudioCanal (reviewed last issue), and now we have the first in a series of four volumes of Hammer boxsets planned by indie label Indicator.

Splitting its selection of four films evenly between the studio's supernatural horrors and psychological thrillers, this boxset kicks off with the twisty black-and-white chiller *Maniac* (1963) about an American artist who becomes involved with both bar owner Eve and her teenage stepdaughter. An already volatile situation is made even more hairy when Eve's nutty husband is sprung from the local asylum where he has spent the past few years.

Anyone put off by the set's lack of any of the studio's iconic *Dracula* or *Frankenstein* films can take solace in *The Gorgon* (1963), which reunites Hammer stalwarts Peter Cushing and Christopher Lee – albeit both playing against type – in a fascinating twist on the traditional werewolf myth.

Despite a neat twist in its final act, *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* (1964) struggles to do anything really new with the shambling monster. Thankfully, Fred Clark's exuberant turn as a P.T. Barnum-esque showman adds some much needed energy and humour to the production.

Last up is the delightfully bonkers 1964 psycho-thriller *Fanatic* (aka *Die! Die! My Darling!*). Coming



across like a crazed slice of Southern Gothic transposed to a quaint English village, the film finds a young American woman (Stefanie Powers) being held prisoner by her deceased fiancé's fanatically religious mother (Tallulah Bankhead).

Picture: *Maniac*'s black-and-white 2.35:1 transfer offers accurate greyscale and super contrast, while *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* has no trouble resolving the rich colours and heavy grain inherent in the 2.35:1 Techniscope photography. *The Gorgon* and *Fanatic* (framed at 1.66:1 and 1.85:1 respectively) also hold up to close scrutiny in 1080p, with plenty of detail in evidence throughout.

Audio: Each film features an LPCM presentation of the original mono soundtrack. Evidently, these have received just as much attention as the visuals during the clean-up process. Completely free from hiss and distortions, these tracks handle dialogue and Foley effects with ease, while bringing rich tonality to the quartet of lush scores.

Extras: For the most part the four Blu-rays stick to a specific template for extras that includes a dedicated retrospective featurette, new interviews, video essays about a particular actress, an extensive gallery of stills and posters, and the trailer. On top of all of this, *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* adds the (black-and-white, silent) Super 8 version; *The Gorgon* receives a commentary by critics Kat Ellinger and Samm Deighan, plus a reproduction of the 1977 comic book adaptation; and *Fanatic* offers the choice of watching it with UK or US opening titles. Each Blu-ray also comes bundled with its own booklet.

HCC VERDICT

Hammer: Volume One – Fear Warning!

→ Indicator → All-region BD
→ £60

WE SAY: An impressive hi-def set for a quartet of lesser-known Hammer horrors. Roll on Volume Two...

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

The Jabberwocky

The Criterion Collection → Region B BD £28



As was the case with its earlier release of Terry Gilliam's *The Fisher King*, Criterion has put together a fantastic

HD package for the filmmaker's first solo directorial outing. Based on a new 4K restoration produced by the BFI National Archive and The Film Foundation, the 1.85:1-framed transfer is authentically gritty and grubby in the best possible way. The disc also packs plenty of rewarding extra features. A shame, then, that the movie itself feels less like a coherent story than a bunch of halfheartedly strung together *Monty Python* and *the Holy Grail* leftovers.



Black Christmas

101 Films → Region B BD & R2 DVD £15



While this UK release of Bob Clark's seminal 1974 slasher can't hold a candle to the stacked two-disc Collector's

Edition unleashed in the US last Xmas by Shout! Factory, it's not a bad option for those looking for a cheaper alternative or who can't play Region A-locked titles. The 1.85:1 encode retains an authentically coarse appearance, while delivering good detailing and rich colours. Audio defaults to an LPCM 5.1 mix, although there's also an LPCM 2.0 track on the disc (despite the lack of a menu option to switch between them). Extras include interviews, TV and radio spots, and a 2014 reunion panel.



The Haunting: Premium Collection

Warner Bros. → All-region BD & R2 DVD £15 (HMV exclusive)



Robert Wise's spooky 1963 adaptation of Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hell House* is widely touted

as being one of the best ghost stories ever made – and with good reason. Taking a 'less is more' approach to the source material, the film is the antithesis of the bombastic 1999 remake and does a far better job of making the hairs stand up on the back of your neck. This Blu-ray scores highly with its crisp black-and-white 2.40:1 imagery and creepy mono DTS-HD sonics, although extras are limited to a trailer and commentary.



Torture Garden

Indicator → All-region BD £16



A fiendish feline and possessed piano are just two of the treats that lie in wait in this second of Amicus's

classic horror anthologies. Despite the presence of Freddie Francis behind the camera and the likes of Peter Cushing, Jack Palance and Burgess Meredith in front of it, *Torture Garden* proves to be a rather middling addition to the genre that's more corny than scary. If neither the film nor its drab 1080p encode are likely to get your heart racing, genre fans should get a kick out of the superb new interviews and archival goodies assembled for this Blu-ray release.



Gone but definitely not forgotten

Feature-packed boxset celebrates the early works of the recently-deceased genre legend

→ GEORGE A. ROMERO: BETWEEN NIGHT AND DAWN

While the huge influence his *Night.../Dawn.../Day of the Dead* trilogy had on horror cinema ensures that the late George A. Romero will always be remembered as the 'father of the zombie film', his 40-year career as a filmmaker understandably dealt with more than just the undead.

This revealing set houses three of the four films Romero shot between his 1968 debut *Night of the Living Dead* and its 1978 follow-up *Dawn of the Dead* (1978's *Martin* sadly remains MIA on Blu-ray).

Notable as one of only two films that he directed and didn't write, 1971 counterculture comedy *There's Always Vanilla* doesn't quite hold together, but is still far from being the 'total mess' Romero later deemed it to be.

More interesting still is 1973's *Season of the Witch*, a mini-masterpiece of suburban witchcraft with a strong feminist subtext. Hacked about by its distributors and released in various different cuts, the film was even marketed as a softcore exploitation flick called *Hungry Wives*.

1973's *The Crazies* is another of Romero's brutal (and blackly comic) allegories concerning societal breakdown – this time caused by the accidental release of a military bio-weapon – and is both an entertaining film in its own right and a trial run for several of the ideas and themes he would end up refining in *Dawn of the Dead*.

Picture: Arrow undertook its own restorations of the three films for this set. The 2K restoration of *There's Always Vanilla* does the best it can with the source



elements, but there are obvious issues with colour stability and damage that stems from the unstable film stock.

Season of the Witch and *The Crazies* (both restored at 4K) look much better

– although an alternate 104-minute cut of the former has to use quite rough looking SD inserts as the best available option for its additional footage.

Audio: The trio of LPCM 1.0 mono tracks perfectly replicate the limited dynamic range of the source materials while also doing a surprisingly good job of showing up all of the ADR work. Authentic then, but not exactly what you'd call exciting.

Extras: In addition to a fascinating 58-page book about the films, the discs themselves house a generous clutch of extras. These include chat-tracks from film journalist Travis Crawford, new and archival interviews, photo galleries, alternate opening titles, behind-the-scenes footage and trailers.



HCC VERDICT

George A. Romero: Between Night and Dawn

→ Arrow Video → All-region BD & R2 DVD → £60

WE SAY: Hardly an AV showcase, but still a fascinating package for fans of the influential filmmaker.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Spidey comes home to Marvel

Crowd-pleasing superhero reboot will snare you in a web of action and humour



Iron Man and Spidey beat the rush-hour...



→ SPIDER-MAN: HOMECOMING

Studio rights shenanigans have given us so many *Spider-Man* films in the past couple of decades that your heart is probably sinking at the thought of watching another one. But by going back to the character's comic book roots and adding Spidey to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* does genuinely bring something new to the table.

Following on from his team-up with Iron Man and chums in *Captain America: Civil War*, Peter Parker (Tom Holland) must return to his mundane life at high-school, waiting for a call from Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) to join the Avengers. But when the call never comes, the impetuous Peter decides to continue his life as a costumed crime-fighter on the streets of New York, regardless of whether or not Stark actually thinks he's ready.

Trouble rears its head when Spidey crosses paths with a gang of criminals armed with seriously high-tech weapons. It seems that in the wake of the Chitauri attack on New York (*Avengers Assemble*), embittered former construction engineer Adrian Toomes (Michael Keaton) got his hands on a bunch of scavenged alien tech, which he is now using to

arm criminals and exact revenge on the rich elite who were responsible for stealing his livelihood.

Delivering a winning mix of slick superheroics and mirthsome John Hughes-style high school antics, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* gleefully pulls (or rather swings) Spidey slap bang into the 21st century. Tom Holland injects palpable enthusiasm and charm into the lead role, while Michael Keaton brings plenty of conviction to his role of that rarest of things – a compelling MCU villain.

After far too long a wait, fans have another Spider-Man film worthy of being called 'Amazing'.

Picture: *Spider-Man: Homecoming* arrives on 4K Blu-ray boasting strong Dolby Vision and core HDR10 transfers. The Dolby Vision one, though, is comfortably the best option.

The way it issues Dolby Vision TVs with extra scene by scene information helps the transfer enjoy a palpably wider dynamic range that's particularly effective during dark scenes. For instance, after Iron Man rescues Spider-Man from a lake, the lights of Iron Man's suit look more intense against the night skies around them than they do with the HDR10 transfer.

There's also more precision and realism to the Dolby Vision encodes's colour grading, and a general small uptick in detail versus the HDR10 image. That HDR10 image is itself a superb effort.

Director Jon Watts made his young cast watch a John Hughes movie marathon as preparation for their roles





**DISC
OF THE
MONTH**



surprisingly given its superhero subject matter, its charm lies not in its foundation-ruining bass lines or stomach-wobbling explosions, but rather in the finer things in audio life. The track sparkles with high levels of detail liberally distributed around all your Atmos channels, bringing every environment to life with a lovely sense of scale and authenticity that fits perfectly with Spider-Man's relatively 'earthly' character.

The score, too, is given the full Atmos treatment, including lots of stereo separation, even in the rear channels, and a height element that's stirring used to expand the soundstage during action and outdoor scenes.

Some may find the mix a little restrained during big action set-pieces, such as the passenger ferry 'incident'. But there's a case to be made for reining in some of a soundtrack's extremes when the compensation is more clarity.

Extras: The 4K ...*Homecoming* disc carries a couple of features. The *Spidey Study Guide* sounds intriguing with its promise of pop-up trivia on the Marvel comic world, but will soon bore all but the most die-hard of fans. The 4K disc's photo gallery is more fun, featuring some gorgeous shots of concept artwork and behind-the-scenes footage.

The accompanying HD Blu-ray delivers more than an hour of further goodies, including a short gag reel, a sequence of deleted and extended scenes most notable for their unfinished special effects, a series of hilarious Captain America public safety videos, and a bunch of featurettes covering everything from the film's casting process to its stunts, director and the creation of the Vulture.



Spider-Man returns to the bigscreen in next year's *Avengers: Infinity War*



First *Batman* (1989), then *Birdman* (2014), now *Vulture* – what is it with Michael Keaton and flying creatures?

There's a surprisingly palpable increase in detail versus the HD Blu-ray, even though the 4K image is seemingly derived from a 2K digital intermediate.

The disc's HDR and wide colour gamut features are both used aggressively but sensitively, too, to give the image dynamism and punch while hardly ever looking strained, noisy or gaudy.

Audio: Sony's Ultra HD Blu-ray also sports an excellent Dolby Atmos soundtrack. Perhaps



'Mind the gap!'

HCC VERDICT

Spider-Man: Homecoming

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: This thoroughly modern, highly entertaining reboot places Spidey – tonally and narratively – at the heart of the MCU.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



'We'll have none of your monkey business around here, young lady'



Simian series goes out on a high

Gorilla warfare brings Fox's rebooted science-fiction trilogy to a thrilling conclusion



Matt Reeves cites *The Great Escape* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* among the inspirations for his final ...Apes film

→ WAR FOR THE PLANET OF THE APES

If you're expecting the latest *Planet Of The Apes* to be an all-out, action-packed war film, you're out of luck. Instead you get the new trilogy's most intimate focus yet on lead ape Caesar. And for the most part, we're just fine with that.

Okay, so this narrow focus sometimes leaves the film's human antagonists feeling a touch under-developed. However, the result is still an emotionally rewarding and visually stunning film if you buy into what it's trying to do.

Picture: *War for the Planet of the Apes* provides yet more proof that 2K digital intermediates can deliver a sparkling 4K Blu-ray.

Far from exposing the presumably 2K resolution of the film's CGI apes as you might expect, this crisp, clean and textured 4K encode only enhances your appreciation for the extraordinary effects work. You don't just see individual hairs, you can even see subtle colour and light differences between them. This locates the apes naturally within their environment, rather than leaving them looking superimposed on top of it.

The 4K picture highlight, though, is actually HDR. This greatly expands the baseline brightness of the film's many daylight exteriors and beautifully

expands the dynamic range of darker shots. Colours, too, are gorgeously enriched, with more volume and greater subtlety.

Audio: To answer Edwin Starr's question, one thing war is good for is cinema audio. In keeping with the film's personal approach, though, the 4K disc's Atmos mix does things a bit differently.

Rather than constantly filling your speakers with an exhausting barrage of explosions and gunfire, the mix often pushes the sounds of action into the background in favour of Michael Giacchino's score; filtering everything through Caesar's emotions.

You don't get quite the sort of dramatic transitions, high levels of multichannel spatial detailing and explosive bass and dynamics you'll find on more traditional war movie mixes. That doesn't mean this isn't brilliant, though. In fact, its decision to focus on cocooning you in a cohesive bubble of atmosphere pays off in spades.

Extras: The only extra on the 4K disc is a terrific commentary by director Matt Reeves that delivers just the right balance of on-set anecdotes and discussions of the film's themes.

All other extras are found on the accompanying Full HD Blu-ray. These include 25 minutes of deleted scenes (with optional commentary), plus a series of featurettes on various aspects of making the film and its nods to the original ...Apes movies.

HCC VERDICT

War for the Planet of the Apes

→ Twentieth Century Fox
→ UHD BD & All-region BD → £30

WE SAY: A satisfying pay-off to the surprisingly effective trilogy. That it also looks and sounds the business on 4K BD is the icing on the cake.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★



Jack's back! Should we care?

It's business as usual as Johnny Depp sets sail for a fifth piratical adventure

→ PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

After painstakingly eroding the charm of the first *Pirates Of The Caribbean* film with three increasingly leaden sequels, Disney here tries to reboot the franchise by pretty much remaking the first one, with a bit of the second thrown in for good measure.

Unfortunately, the script lacks the wit to make its rehased ideas fly and, apart from Javier Bardem's drooling, hissing Captain Salazar, none of the new characters make an impact. Still, average though it is, it's possibly the second best *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, so we guess that's something.

Curiously, Disney has chosen not to release the film (known here as *...Salazar's Revenge*) on UHD Blu-ray in the UK, but a 4K platter is available to import from the US...

Picture: The opening scenes set a rather soft tone, only showing marginally more detail than you get with the 1080p encode.

Also, while peak bright highlights look more intense, they're fairly restrained by 4K BD standards. It's the same with colour; there's more intensity to tones, and more finesse and detail. But that's as far as it goes.

That said, occasionally the transfer goes up a gear – mostly during the daylight on-deck sequences between Barbossa and Salazar. But such moments are the exception, not the rule.



'They're behind you!'

Audio: If the 4K picture quality barely justifies its extra expense over the 'regular' Blu-ray, the soundtrack fares rather better. It offers a strong Atmos mix full of height effects and if there's not quite enough detailing among the bombast (especially in the rear channels) to qualify it as a reference mix, it's still rousing and enjoyable.

Extras: Best of the bonus bits (all stowed away on the accompanying Full HD platter) is a 47-minute *Making of...* documentary. The rest is all fluff by comparison; just a brief (though inevitably amusing) blooper reel, a selection of photographs taken by producer Jerry Bruckheimer, and a series of four deleted scenes.

HCC VERDICT

Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales

→ Walt Disney → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £35 (US import)

WE SAY: A decent 4K presentation of a solid, if unspectacular, sequel.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

Apollo 13

Universal Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £40



Ron Howard's gripping account of the troubled 1970 Apollo lunar mission makes an impressive transition to Ultra HD Blu-ray. Using the 4K scan of the original 35mm camera negatives that also

served as the basis for the same studio's 20th Anniversary Edition Blu-ray release, this 2160p presentation is authentically film-like in appearance and packed with nuanced textures. HDR application is subtle, but the added dynamic range brings more depth to the cramped confines of the craft. The DTS:X audio makeover is another triumph.

★★★★★

Baywatch: Extended Edition

Universal Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £40



This glossy gross-out comedy certainly packs a real punch in 4K. Bursting with primary

colours, the imagery has a terrific intensity that sells the film's sun-drenched setting, and while it was finished at 2K, this upscale still demonstrates a slight boost in sharpness and clarity, revealing more refined detail in close-up shots. The Dolby Atmos mix is identical to the track featured on the Blu-ray release (reviewed in HCC #278) and proves just as satisfying again here. As usual, the extras are all relegated to the accompanying Full HD platter.

★★★★★

Wonder Woman

Warner Bros. → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £35



Despite the promise of being shot on a mix of 35mm film stock and 6K digital files, the visual effects for this cracking superhero film were finished at 2K, and there's quite a lot of them to soften the image slightly. Thankfully, the 2160p encode Warner Bros. has delivered is still rather wonderful, delivering a clear uptick in detail and colour depth over the (already rather lovely) 1080p Blu-ray we looked at a couple of issues back. Doubtless some viewers will be put off by the heavy grain that's present throughout the film, but it represents the look of the source material perfectly.

★★★★★



Coppola vamps it up in 4K

Upgraded HDR visuals and Atmos sonics aid this extravagant adaptation

→ **BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA:** **25TH ANNIVERSARY**

It's almost impossible to imagine Francis Ford Coppola's extravagantly bonkers adaptation of *Dracula* getting made today. It's just too out there. Which means, of course, that it's a cult classic.

From the use of 1920s-style practical special effects and lush costuming through to its histrionic acting and direction, it delivers a startlingly vivid evocation of the Gothic style and setting of Stoker's novel. This will alienate some, but you have to admire the purity of Coppola's vision. And it's never less than huge fun.

Picture: *Dracula* has been digitally scanned at 4K from an original 35mm negative. The results look quite different to the smooth, ultra-polished look associated with the digital sources used for more recent film releases. This sets the film in its time, and feels like an authentic capture of the grain you inevitably get with celluloid negatives.

What's more, the 4K Blu-ray's application of HDR and a wider colour gamut works wonders on the gorgeous sets, costumes and make up, enhancing its Gothic credentials and giving it a welcome new lease of life for modern audiences.

Audio: The film's 4K visuals are partnered with the same Atmos remix created for 2015's (US-only) Supreme Cinema Blu-ray release. Sadly, the accompanying UK BD doesn't feature the track.

While some purists may bristle at the original Dolby Digital source being tinkered with, the results are actually excellent. The sound's scale is ramped up dramatically, which feels perfectly appropriate to



'Spare some change, guv?'

HCC VERDICT

Bram Stoker's Dracula: **25th Anniversary**

→ Sony Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £30

WESAY: This enjoyably hammy flick receives a worthwhile 4K revamp.

Movie: ★★★★★

Picture: ★★★★★

Audio: ★★★★★

Extras: ★★★★★

OVERALL: ★★★★★

the film's histrionic tone. Wojciech Kilar's terrific score is fantastically well mixed to take advantage of Atmos's height layer, and while effects steering has been enhanced, it's never showy.

Extras: The extras are all found on the Full HD Blu-ray, and add up to a comprehensive package. The highlights are two commentary tracks (one by Coppola alone, one by Coppola, effects supervisor Roman Coppola, and make-up artist Greg Cannom) that add tons of fascinating background.

A series of substantial interview features and mini-documentaries give further insight to the creative process, and give us a reminder of why we still love to buy our movies on disc...

Serenity

Universal Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £40



Writer-director Joss Whedon's bigscreen conclusion to his short-lived TV series *Firefly* may not have

been the box office hit Universal hoped for, but a devoted fanbase ensures that the title keeps cropping up fairly early on in the studio's releases for any new disc format (as happened with both HD DVD and Blu-ray). Sadly, looking for all the world like an old 2K master that's had an HDR pass applied to boost colours and contrast, this 4K upscale is unlikely to convert many newcomers to join the film's admirers – although the remixed DTS:X audio is agreeably bombastic.

★★★★★

The Mummy

Universal Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £40



The first instalment in Universal Studio's new 'Dark Universe' of rebooted monster movies is something of a frustrating experience on Ultra HD BD. While the HDR adds a little more punch to the 4K visuals (upscaled from a 2K digital intermediate), the 2.40:1 transfer remains hamstrung by rather muddy and flatly-lit cinematography. The result is a 4K image that lacks real depth and only offers a moderate improvement in fine detailing over the 'regular' BD. At least the Atmos soundmix is still as much fun as ever – and the extras are surprisingly informative and enjoyable.

★★★★★

The Purge: 3-Movie Collection

Universal Pictures → Ultra HD BD & All-region BD → £58



It's hard to believe that this trio of dystopian horror films was at the top of anyone's 4K wish list, but here they are in one reasonably priced boxset. While all of the films were finished at 2K and have been upscaled for this release, the new 4K encodes demonstrate clear improvements in realising complex textures, while HDR and increased colour depth really come into their own across the increasingly garish sequels. The three *Purge* films have also benefitted from audio upgrades, with new DTS:X mixes proving to be particularly potent affairs.

★★★★★



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Collecting...

Marvel movies

With *Spider-Man: Homecoming* swinging into a home cinema near you, **Team HCC** rounds up 10 more Marvel-ous superhero movies for your consideration...



AVENGERS ASSEMBLE

Having established its key heroes through standalone films, Marvel Studios brought 'Phase One' of its Cinematic Universe to a close with this epic superhero slugfest. Uniting Iron Man, Thor, Captain America and the Hulk (plus newcomers Black Widow and Hawkeye), the first *Avengers* film set a new benchmark for bigscreen superhero action and was cinematic nirvana for comic book junkies everywhere.

Get it: Disney's late adoption of the Ultra HD Blu-ray format means that the 'regular' Blu-ray (be it 2D or 3D) is still the best-looking and -sounding version of *Avengers Assemble* you can buy. The disc has been re-released numerous times over the years in various steelbooks and boxsets – just be aware that all the UK releases feature a minor cut and drop the commentary track.



IRON MAN

The 2008 film that launched the MCU remains a terrific piece of popcorn cinema thanks to its killer visual effects and Robert Downey Jr.'s charismatic turn as Tony Stark/Iron Man.

Get it: For the full *Iron Man* experience you'll need to grab Paramount's original 2008 Ultimate Edition Blu-ray, which includes an exclusive bonus platter loaded with extra features.



X-MEN 2

As much as audiences enjoyed Bryan Singer's first foray into the X-Men universe, there was always a feeling that the film never delivered the sort of action and spectacle comic books fans were hoping for. The same cannot be said of his 2003 follow-up, which exploded right out of the gate with Nightcrawler's astonishing White House attack before finally letting Wolverine off the leash. Snikt!

Get it: Grab the eight-film *X-Men Collection* Blu-ray boxset for under £20.



CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

By 2014 the MCU was starting to feel like a pretty safe place – until this film arrived and turned everything on its head. Fusing the superhero movie with 1970s-style conspiracy thrillers, ...*The Winter Soldier* ripped down one of the main tent poles of the MCU while simultaneously turning Captain America (potentially the duller of all heroes) into its MVP.

Get it: The out-of-print Zavvi-exclusive 3D Blu-ray steelbook will prove your fan credentials.

TOP PICK



DEADPOOL

Fox gave its *X-Men* franchise a shot in the arm in 2016 with this violent, puerile, foul-mouthed and fourth-wall-breaking action comedy that casts Ryan Reynolds as the deformed mercenary whose major super power appears to be his gift for rapid-fire gags. A massive hit at the box office, *Deadpool* proved that superhero films aren't just for kids and that there's still room to experiment within the genre.

Get it: Crisp 2160p visuals and lively Dolby Atmos sonics make the 4K BD a must-own.



GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY

Critics who'd complained that Marvel Studios was risk averse had to eat their words when the company threw somewhere in the region of \$200m at this sci-fi comic book adaptation starring a gun-toting space racoon, written and directed by a filmmaker whose previous credits include *Tromeo and Juliet* and *Slither*. Clearly the risk was worth it, as the 2014 film was a box office smash and spawned a similarly successful sequel.

Get it: The 3D Blu-ray makes the most of the eye-popping visuals; no news on a 4K release yet.



LOGAN

Taking Mark Millar's *Old Man Logan* comic as its starting point, this year's acclaimed *X-Men* spin-off finds an aged Wolverine looking after an ailing Charles Xavier and going into battle one last time to save mutant-kind from those who would rather see it wiped from the face of the planet. Brutal and brilliant, this is the best possible send-off for Hugh Jackman's portrayal of Wolverine.

Get it: Fab Atmos sonics and 4K encodes of both the colour and 'noir' versions of the film mean the UHD BD is the one to get.



BIG HERO 6

Given that Marvel Comics has been owned by The Walt Disney Company since 2009, it's odd that the House of Mouse has pretty much ignored the idea of producing animated adaptations of its catalogue. One exception is this delightful 2009 'toon about a young science prodigy who puts together a team of high-tech heroes to battle a mysterious, masked villain plaguing the futuristic city of San Fransokyo.

Get it: The utterly gorgeous (and long out-of-print) limited edition Blu-ray steelbook includes both the 2D and 3D discs and will set you back around £45.



BLADE

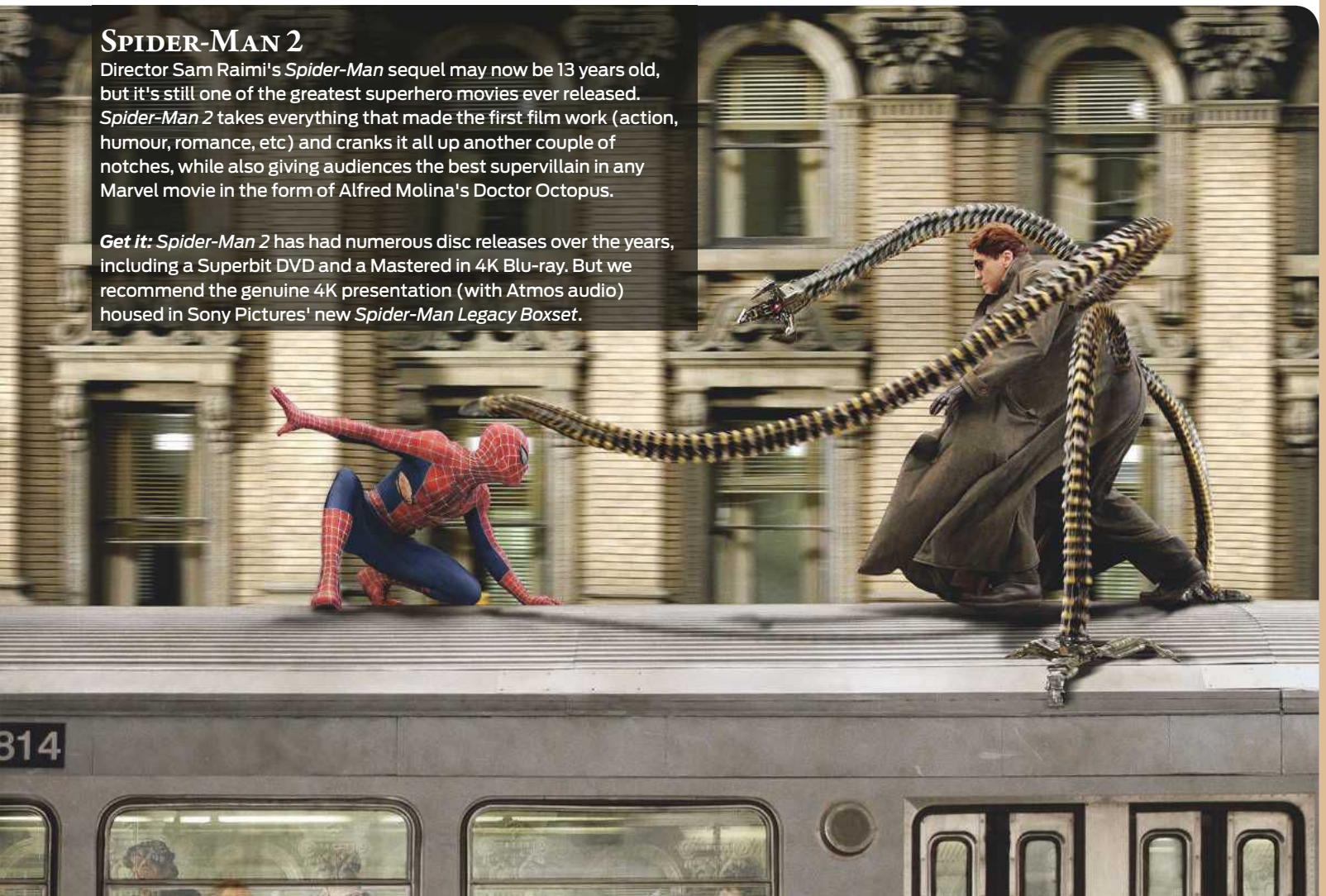
Released a year after *Batman & Robin* had seemingly hammered the final nail into the coffin for superhero flicks, this 1998 film about a human-vampire hybrid took the genre in a much darker direction and in doing so turned out to be Marvel's first real box office hit. *Blade* also helped lay the groundwork for the bigger budget Marvel movies like *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) that followed.

Get it: The same all-region *Blade* Blu-ray is available on its own in the UK or in a boxset with its two sequels in the US. Neither option will cost you very much.

SPIDER-MAN 2

Director Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* sequel may now be 13 years old, but it's still one of the greatest superhero movies ever released. *Spider-Man 2* takes everything that made the first film work (action, humour, romance, etc) and cranks it all up another couple of notches, while also giving audiences the best supervillain in any Marvel movie in the form of Alfred Molina's Doctor Octopus.

Get it: *Spider-Man 2* has had numerous disc releases over the years, including a Superbit DVD and a Mastered in 4K Blu-ray. But we recommend the genuine 4K presentation (with Atmos audio) housed in Sony Pictures' new *Spider-Man Legacy Boxset*.



Have we missed one of your favourite Marvel movie adaptations?
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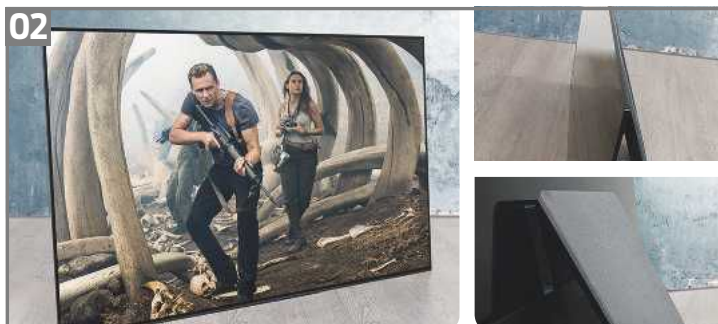
Outstanding	★★★★★
Above average	★★★★☆
Acceptable	★★★☆☆
Disappointing	★★☆☆☆
Dire	★☆☆☆☆

All prices quoted are approximate and may have changed

TOP 10 Televisions

**Sony KD-65ZD9** → £3,500 ★★★★★

Sony finished 2016 on a high with this full-array LED Bravia (with advanced local dimming tech) that claims a 1,800-nit peak brightness. Cinematic, sublime pictures – and Dolby Vision support is a firmware update away. *HCC #267*

**Sony KD-55A1** → £3,500 ★★★★★

Another Sony set due a Dolby Vision upgrade later this year, this 55in OLED dazzles with its image quality (including superb motion processing), hidden Acoustic Surface speaker technology and eye-catching styling. *HCC #275*

**LG OLED65E7**

→ £5,000 ★★★★★

3D playback is dropped, but the E7 offers welcome picture improvements over last year's E6, particularly brightness and near-black talents. Supports Dolby Vision. *HCC #274*

**Panasonic TX-55EZ952**

→ £2,500 ★★★★★

A 55in OLED TV with an effortlessly naturalistic performance, although not as bright as some rivals. Gorgeous, understated design and premium build quality. *HCC #277*

**Philips 55POS9002**

→ £2,200 ★★★★★

Philips' second-gen Android-powered OLED takes a more refined approach to its processing, focusing on balanced cinematic imagery. Ambilight, as usual, boosts your immersion. *HCC #276*

**Samsung UE49MU7000**

→ £1,000 ★★★★★

Not one of Samsung's top-flight TVs, but a cracking mid-range 49in model that presents 4K and HD material with bright, rich colours and stable blacks. Good choice for an affordable setup. *HCC #277*

**Samsung QE65Q9F**

→ £4,900 ★★★★★

This premium 'QLED' screen outguns rivals when it comes to brightness and visual impact. Routinely stunning, but edge LED lighting has some niggles. Supports Samsung's HDR 10+ format. *HCC #273*

**Sony KD-55XE8596**

→ £1,100 ★★★★★

A real 4K bargain, combining a 55in screen with a solid picture performance. HDR doesn't zing due to a lack of sheer brightness, but it benefits from backlight stability. Impressive with regular HD, too. *HCC #278*

**Panasonic TX-65EX750**

→ £1,900 ★★★★★

A (surprise!) 3D-capable LED screen that offers well-controlled backlighting, pleasing 4K clarity and good HD upscaling. Not the brightest around, and some colour inconsistencies. *HCC #279*

**LG 55SJ850V**

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

Backlight distractions hinder this set's performance in low-lit rooms, but it's a strong all-rounder, offering Dolby Vision HDR, WebOS smarts, well-rounded sonics and a bargain price tag. *HCC #276*

TOP 5 Blu-ray movies

**The Fate of the Furious**
[Ultra HD Blu-ray]

The eighth entry to the popular franchise continues the feel of parts 5, 6 and 7, with stunts and punch-ups aplenty. Universal's disc marries Dolby Vision HDR to a largescale soundmix.

★★★★★

**Alien: Covenant**
[Ultra HD Blu-ray]

This sequel to a prequel isn't the best of the *Alien* franchise, but still makes for a scary night on your cinema sofa. The 4K disc adds an Atmos audio mix to its assured HDR presentation.

★★★★★

**The Handmaiden**

Park Chan-wook directs this lavish, sensual Korean-language period thriller, which arrives on Blu-ray with gorgeous Theatrical and Extended cuts and accomplished audio. A Q&A with Chan-wook is an extras highlight.

★★★★★

**Wonder Woman**

The highlight so far of the DC Extended Universe gives its heroine plenty of opportunity to shine in its WWI-era origin story, and the BD challenges your speaker setup with a wonderful Dolby Atmos soundmix.

★★★★★

**Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2**
[Ultra HD Blu-ray]

Disney's first 4K disc offers reference-grade visuals with expansive contrast and rich colours. The movie is the expected blend of quick wit and explosive set-pieces.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Blu-rays



01 Oppo UDP-203 → £650 ★★★★★

Oppo refreshes its player hardware with a superb universal design with Ultra HD playback (including Dolby Vision via firmware update). Packed with user adjustments and connectivity. No apps or Darbee processing, though. HCC #269



02 Oppo UDP-205 → £1,400 ★★★★★

This pricey, peerless UHD deck flaunts universal disc playback, asynchronous USB input, headphone amp and balanced stereo outs amongst its audiophile features. One for musos. HCC #274



03 Sony UBP-X800 → £400 ★★★★★

Sony embraces UHD Blu-ray with a full-width, sturdy design that'll also spin DVD-A and SACD platters. A great all-rounder, but no current Dolby Vision support or word on an update. HCC #274



04 Panasonic DMP-UB900 → £600 ★★★★★

The Ultra HD Blu-ray format got an inspiring debut in Panasonic's multi-talented deck that offers a sterling picture performance, 4K-enabled VOD apps and analogue audio outs. No DV. HCC #259



05 Cambridge Audio CXUHD → £800 ★★★★★

The lack of analogue outputs is a surprise considering CA's heritage, but this universal (and DV-capable) deck sounds sweet over its digital outs. As with Oppo's UDP-203, a MediaTek SoC is used. HCC #279



06 Panasonic DMP-UB700 → £300 ★★★★★

Shorn of some of the audiophile niceties of the UB900 (including multichannel analogue outputs), but still a safe pair of hands with your 4K BDs. And at a bargain price. HCC #270



07 Arcam FMJ UDP411 → £1,200 ★★★★★

Pristine visuals – including upscaled SD – and a classy sonic performance grant this Arcam instant appeal. The design and build is commensurate with the premium price tag. HCC #244



08 Panasonic DMP-UB300 → £240 ★★★★★

Great 4K imagery from this bargain deck, but you might prefer to up your budget for the UB700 – no split HDMI, optical/coaxial or Wi-Fi connections here. Half-size design for an easy install. HCC #272



09 Samsung UBD-K8500 → £270 ★★★★★

Debut Ultra HD Blu-ray player that finds fans courtesy of its sensible price point (now even lower), connected smarts and eye-catching visuals. Build quality is a little uninspiring. HCC #260



10 Samsung UBD-M9500 → £350 ★★★★★

Second-gen 4K player that adds features (mobile BD streaming, 360-degree image support) but removes 3D playback capability. As before, the chassis is curved. UHD discs look pin-sharp. HCC #275

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TOP 10 Projectors



01 Sony VPL-VW550ES → £9,000 ★★★★★

For its top-range domestic SXRD beamer, Sony introduces an HDR Contrast tool that proves useful in fine-tuning its UHD Blu-ray performance. Excels with standard BD content and setup flexibility, too. *HCC #269*



02 JVC DLA-X7000 → £5,700 ★★★★★

With contrast and brightness improvements over the more affordable DLA-X5000, this is a great bigscreen option, although its SDR playback impresses more than HDR. *HCC #259*



03 Sony VPL-HW45ES

→ £1,850 ★★★★★

The most affordable model in Sony's home cinema range, the Full HD-resolution 45ES features excellent light management for a routinely cinematic image. Great value. *HCC #263*



04 Optoma UHD60

→ £2,400 ★★★★★

An assured Ultra HD debut from Optoma – the UHD60 presents 4K Blu-rays with a pleasing contrast balance and lush detail. SDR-HDR conversion tool is best avoided, though. *HCC #277*



05 Optoma UHD65

→ £3,000 ★★★★★

4K DLP model that adds motion processing, enhanced colour response and a theatre-room friendly black chassis over Optoma's UHD60, but commands a more expensive price. *HCC #278*



06 Acer V7850

→ £2,700 ★★★★★

One rung below Acer's largescale V9800 4K debut sits this more affordable model. Again, black levels aren't its strong point, but this runs bright, sharp and super-quiet. *HCC #276*



07 Epson EH-TW6700

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

HDR and 4K scaling are off the menu, leaving this mid-range model to concentrate on cinematic HD images. Bright, crisp performance, plenty of tweaks, but no 12V trigger. *HCC #271*



08 Epson EH-TW9300

→ £3,000 ★★★★★

Epson brings HDR playback and 4K up-rezzing to an agreeable price tag. Colourful and well-contrasted visuals, but don't expect an HDR knockout. *HCC #266*



09 Epson EH-TW7300

→ £2,200 ★★★★★

Similar performance traits to its bigger EH-TW9300 sibling, but with reductions in max brightness (and claimed contrast). Currently the most affordable HDR model around. *HCC #269*



10 BenQ W2000

→ £800 ★★★★★

Average black-level performance limits this model's all-round appeal, but elsewhere this Full HD DLP budget PJ catches the eye with its calibration options and detailed visuals. *HCC #257*

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TOP 10 Speakers



01 **Monitor Audio Gold 300AV** →£7,150 ★★★★★
MA revamps its Gold Series and we pay serious attention. This big-ticket package excels across the frequency range, offers exquisite design and packs setup flexibility via the dipole/monopole FX surrounds. HCC #251



02 **Q Acoustics 3000 5.1 Cinema Pack** →£700 ★★★★★
A superior compact package with driver improvements over the previous 2000i series. The two-way cabinets and dual-driver sub combine to offer impressive audio for the money. HCC #247



03 **KEF R Series 7.1**
→£6,500 ★★★★★
A 7.1 set mixing dipolar and direct surrounds, this package takes its cues from KEF's Blade and offers faultless, largescale home cinema sonics. HCC #217



04 **Monitor Audio Bronze B5 AV**
→£1,500 ★★★★★
Like their Gold siblings, these feature switchable surround speakers and MA's C-CAM drivers. Smaller in stature and output, but eminently more affordable. HCC #254



05 **ATC HTS7 5.1**
→£3,500 ★★★★★
Brit brand ATC rejigs the driver tech and neutral sound of its SCM range into a wall-mountable, flexible system perfect for discreet AV setups. HCC #275



06 **ELAC Debut 5.1.2**
→£1,950 ★★★★★
Well-priced floorstanding Atmos system that manages to balance subtlety and precision with an exciting delivery. Subwoofer includes app-based room EQ. HCC #262



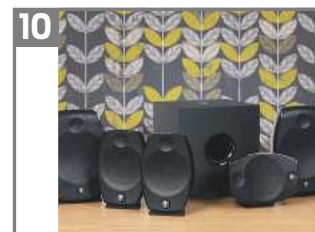
07 **Wharfedale Diamond 11 HCP** →£800 ★★★★★
Bookshelf speakers and 10in sub combine in a system that offers mid-range and treble finesse and a healthy dollop of boisterous bass. Fun and affordable. HCC #279



08 **DALI Opticon 5.1**
→£3,200 ★★★★★
The Opticons employ driver designs from DALI's high-end models, and showcase a talent for involving music presentation and thrilling home cinema. HCC #260



09 **Polk Signature Series 5.1**
→£1,450 ★★★★★
Largescale performance from a well-priced floorstanding system with slimmed-down centre enclosure. Upfront and boisterous sound; a great entertainer. HCC #273



10 **Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos 5.1.2** →£1,200 ★★★★★
Enjoyable-sounding and well-priced sub/sat system with Atmos upfiring in front L/R enclosures. Not the smallest 'satellite' speakers around. HCC #276



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Photo courtesy of Gary J. Fernandez Limited

TOP 10 AV Receivers/AV Processors

01



Anthem MRX 1120 → £4,000 ★★★★★

Combining Anthem's superb ARC room EQ system with 11-channel amplification makes this an essential consideration for full-spec Atmos setups. Muscular, precise sound. No networking skills, though. HCC #265

02



Arcam AVR850 → £4,500 ★★★★★

High-end seven-channel AVR marrying Class G amplification and Atmos (and future DTS:X) support with talented Dirac Live Room EQ. 11-channel pre-outs for full-fat setups. HCC #257

03



Denon AVR-X4300H

→ £1,300 ★★★★★

Nine-channel receiver with HEOS multiroom integration and 11-channel processing (Atmos, DTS:X, plus Auro-3D as a paid-for upgrade). Great, detailed sound and foolproof usability. HCC #267

04



Marantz NR1608

→ £600 ★★★★★

With a smoother sound signature than before and the addition of HEOS multiroom, Marantz's 7.1-channel slim-line AVR flies the flag for living-room friendly AV. Only one HDMI out, though. HCC #278

05



Sony STR-DN1080

→ £550 ★★★★★

Sony is back in the AVR game with a first Atmos model that adds worthy phantom rear speaker processing to its 5.1.2 sonics. A few UI niggles don't take much of the shine off an impressive budget buy. HCC #277

06



Yamaha RX-A3060

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

New nine-channel flagship from Yamaha features excellent room EQ implementation, well-judged DSP modes, and an even-handed, effortless sound. HCC #264

07



Denon AVR-X6300H

→ £2,000 ★★★★★

Denon bundles 11 channels of power, plus cutting-edge features, into this crisp, articulate AV receiver. Ideal partner for 7.1.4 setups, but not quite the muscle-monster you might expect. HCC #269

08



Pioneer VSX-1131

→ £550 ★★★★★

Seven-channel model with Atmos and DTS:X support that features an overhauled remote control and UI to improve usability. Bass-rich, energetic sound. HCC #265

09



Yamaha RX-A860

→ £900 ★★★★★

Only seven channels and hindered by only three HDCP 2.2-enabled HDMI inputs, but beyond that this flexible MusicCast AVR proves a great listen, with plenty of DSP toys. HCC #270

10



Denon HEOS AVR

→ £800 ★★★★★

Able to run wireless rears/sub (using HEOS models) and sporting a display-free design, this is a five-channel AVR with a different approach. One for HEOS devotees only. HCC #276

TOP 5 Bonus features



Sam Peckinpah: Man of Iron – The Director's Cut

Arrow Video bolsters its *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*: Limited Edition Blu-ray with over 10 hours of extended interviews shot for Paul Joyce's fascinating TV doc about the film's director. ★★★★★



Master Class: Ridley Scott

Not as extensive as previous *Making of...* docs accompanying Scott's movies, but this 56-minute feature joining *Alien: Covenant* is well worth a watch, with a strong focus on SFX and creature design. ★★★★★



Napoleon: Triptych

On a package that also features a remarkable five-hour commentary track, the option to watch the movie's three-panel footage on three displays (via three discs) is the icing on the cake. ★★★★★



The Wild One and the BBFC

Accompanying the Marlon Brando classic, this 25-minute interview with former BBFC examiner Richard Falcon provides absorbing insight into the movie's original controversy and 14-year UK ban. ★★★★★



It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World: Extended Cut

Not quite the original theatrical Cinerama version (202 minutes, now lost) but a 198-minute cut put together from numerous sources. A labour of love that varies in image quality. ★★★★★

TOP 10 Subwoofers



01 SVS SB-2000 → £600 ★★★★★

This follow up to the SB-1000 offers immense value for money. A mid-sized woofer that imbibes Blu-rays with quick, taut and potent LFE, it's a perfect introduction to what a truly good sub can accomplish. HCC #233



02 REL No.25 → £6,500 ★★★★★

REL celebrates its 25th anniversary in style with this 15in/1,000W premium concoction that exhibits exhilarating speed and nuance down to serious depths. Big, but beautiful. HCC #271



03 Bowers & Wilkins DB1D → £3,750 ★★★★★

This sequel to the DB1 moves EQ to an app and changes driver/amp design. Beautifully controlled performance with depth and detail. Gorgeous bodywork. HCC #277



04 JL Audio Fathom f212v2 → £6,500 ★★★★★

A second outing for JL's 2 x 12in monster, with an increase in power (3,600W) and room EQ improvements among the changes. Sounds as good as you'd imagine. HCC #261



05 SVS SB16-Ultra → £2,500 ★★★★★

A 16in driver and 1,500W amp combine to give SVS's flagship sealed sub real appeal. Goes low but remains tight and fast. App-assisted EQ and operation. HCC #270



06 REL T7i → £850 ★★★★★

Easy to house 8in sub (with 10in passive driver). Decent LF extension joined by superb speed. Wireless transmission via optional (£200) system. HCC #277



07 BK Electronics P12-300SB-DF → £475 ★★★★★

Bass heads can get outrageous value for money in the shape of BK's overperforming 12in sub. A front-firing model is also offered. HCC #247



08 Eclipse TD520SW → £3,000 ★★★★★

This twin 8in woofer, driven by ICEpower amplification, aims for ultimate speed and tone – and succeeds. Worth every penny of its asking price. HCC #249



09 GoldenEar SuperSub X → £1,450 ★★★★★

Four drivers squeezed into a relatively compact design and given plenty of push from a 1,400W amp. Standout traits are impact and depth. HCC #272



10 SVS PC-2000 → £800 ★★★★★

Cylinder construction means this 12in, 500W design can boast a large cabinet but a relatively small footprint. Good value with weighty, slamming bass. HCC #267

TOP 5 Console games



Uncharted: Lost Legacy

The Drake brothers are replaced by two new heroines in the latest instalment of Sony's PlayStation puzzler. The open-world element hides the relatively short nature of its story mode; HDR visuals are stunning.

★★★★★



Resident Evil 7: Biohazard

Moving from the familiar third-person perspective to a first-person view was always going to be a risk, but it pays off here with a terrifying return to the series' roots. PS4 Pro owners get enhanced resolution visuals.

★★★★★



Prey

Bethesda's FPS (and reboot of the popular 2006 title) refreshes the genre with inanimate-object-mimicking monsters, and offers plenty of gameplay variety. Good-looking, but 4K is limited to PC-based setups.

★★★★★



FIFA 18

EA Sports successfully updates its long-running football sim, with various graphical improvements and tweaks to player animations – the result is a super-slick way to settle family arguments.

★★★★★



Injustice 2

Brilliant follow up to the 2013 superhero beat-'em-up classic, letting you dole out a good kicking to the bad guys while playing as DC Comics legends. Advanced resolution via PS4, plus HDR, too.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Accessories



01 KEF R50 → £600 ★★★★★

KEF's Dolby Atmos-enabled reflective modules are a smart choice to beef up a system. Using the company's Uni-Q point source drivers pays dividends, enabling full-range sonics that reach deep into your cinema room. First-rate build. *HCC #252*



03 Amazon Echo Dot

→ £50 ★★★★★

Less impressive as a standalone speaker than its larger sibling, but a third of the price, and its 3.5mm output lets it work with third-party kit. Fun AI experience. A real bargain. *HCC #269*



04 Nvidia Shield Android TV

→ £180 ★★★★★

The Android-based streamer/gaming box gets a gentle revamp – same silicon, neater design, new features including future support for Google Assistant. Slick and easy to use. *HCC #272*



05 Amazon Fire TV

→ £80 ★★★★★

Media streamer with impressive search functionality and plenty of content, including 4K Netflix and Amazon Video. HDR support would be nice, though. *HCC #270*



06 Logitech Harmony Elite

→ £270 ★★★★★

Flexible and relatively easy to set up, this all-in-one remote package combines touchscreen handset and hub with smart device app. Worthwhile if you have a stacked kit rack. *HCC #256*



07 Devolo Wi-Fi ac Repeater

→ £50 ★★★★★

Simple plug-based add-on that extends the range of your Wi-Fi network, and offers hardwired access. Could be just the ticket for your loft-based movie room. *HCC #269*



08 Naim Uniti Atom

→ £1,900 ★★★★★

Naim's gorgeous Uniti Atom combines DAC, 2 x 40W amp and network/wireless streaming for an audiophile hub. Get this HDMI upgrade model to add your flatscreen TV to the action. *HCC #278*



09 PSB Imagine XA

→ £350 ★★★★★

These two-way Dolby Atmos-enabled upfiring speakers are fairly chunky, but work well at creating a height layer and the £350-per-pair ticket makes them an enticing option. *HCC #264*



10 DVDO iScan Mini

→ £275 ★★★★★

HDMI 4K upscaler (using Silicon Image's VRS processing) that teases sharpness from HD and SD sources. A good fit for an entry-level or mid-range 4K TV. *HCC #264*

TOP 5 Blu-ray/DVD boxsets



American Gods: Complete Season One

Adapted from Neil Gaiman's 2001 fantasy novel, this US series hits the ground running with a wonderfully weird and eye-catching first batch of eight episodes. Addictive stuff.

★★★★★



The Wonderful Worlds of Ray Harryhausen: Vol. One

A trio of Dynamation-packed B-movies (*It Came From Beneath the Sea*, *20 Million Miles to Earth*, *The 3 Worlds of Gulliver*) are joined by heaps of extras on this brilliant BD boxset.

★★★★★



Vikings: Season 4 – Volume 2

The fourth season of this delicious Dark Age drama closes out in style, and this three-disc set boosts the appeal with rampaging DTS-HD MA 5.1 mixes and informative extras.

★★★★★



The 4 Marx Brothers at Paramount (1929-1933)

Five classic comedies from the family troupe get the deluxe treatment – new 1080p transfers from 4K restorations, oodles of bonus goodies – on a pleasing three-disc set.

★★★★★



Ash vs Evil Dead: Season Two

Maniacal spin-off series impresses with its hectic Dolby TrueHD 7.1 mixes, digitally-shot HD encodes and expert mix of horror and gags. Six of the 10 episodes get a chat track.

★★★★★

TOP 10 Soundbars & Soundbases



01 Yamaha YSP-5600SW →£1,900 ★★★★★
With its 46 drivers (including upfiring) this premium 'bar delivers precisely-steered and immersive audio, even of the Atmos variety. Potent wireless sub and 4K-capable HDMI switching sweeten the high-end deal. *HCC #254*



02 Canton DM55 →£330 ★★★★★
Canton's smallest soundbase still delivers big sonic thrills. Twin woofers underpin clean and crisp mids and highs, and build quality is first-rate. Doddle to use. Bluetooth built-in. *HCC #260*



03 Samsung HW-K950 →£1,300 ★★★★★
Soundbar with additional wireless rears and Dolby Atmos support via four upfiring drivers. Impressively largescale performance, good connectivity. No native DTS support. *HCC #263*



04 Samsung HW-MS750 / SWA-W700 →£700/£600 ★★★★★
Upfiring drivers on this premium 'bar, but no Atmos decoding. Performance still dazzles, and the optional sub shows its merits with movie soundmixes. *HCC #278*



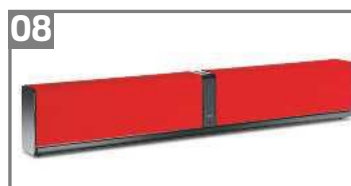
05 Sony HT-ST5000 →£1,500 ★★★★★
High-end Dolby Atmos-capable soundbar/sub. Upfiring elevate the soundstage (but don't wraparound). Sound quality overall is excellent, blending muscle and depth with musicality. *HCC #275*



06 Cabasse Stream BAR →£850 ★★★★★
Soundbar/hi-res speaker that's blessed with real musicality, but doesn't fall short when it comes to energetic film soundtracks. HDMI in/out, but v1.4 only. *HCC #269*



07 Q Acoustics M3 →£300 ★★★★★
A 4in x 6in woofer is tucked away in the M3's eye-catching angular chassis, ensuring this well-priced soundbar has a full-range performance. Simple to use. Bluetooth streaming. *HCC #271*



08 DALI Kubik One →£800 ★★★★★
The Danish speaker brand brings a slice of glamour to your setup with this stylish soundbar. No HDMI or digital decoding but it packs a tight, lively and nuanced sound. *HCC #269*



09 Q Acoustics M2 →£300 ★★★★★
Easily accommodated in/on AV furniture, and packing HDMI ARC for a simple hookup, this BMR-driver/built-in woofer soundbase impresses with its energetic delivery and price. *HCC #279*



10 Sonos Playbase →£700 ★★★★★
Although this features the same foibles as the Sonos Playbar (no Bluetooth, no HDMI, no DTS), this multiroom maestro looks good and sounds good. Detailed, with naturalistic bass. *HCC #273*

TOP 5 Back-catalogue Blu-rays



Ronin
One of Hollywood's greatest car-chase flicks (buoyed by a cast including Robert De Niro and Jean Reno) gets a pristine new 1080p image courtesy of a 4K scan. Arrow Video has rustled up some good bonus bits, too. ★★★★★



Close Encounters of The Third Kind [Ultra HD Blu-ray]
The extras may be reserved for a pricier boxset, but fans of Spielberg's classic sci-fi will dig the authentic image quality of Sony Pictures' UHD release. ★★★★★



Point Blank: Premium Collection
John Boorman's lean, mean 1967 thriller starring Lee Marvin arrives on UK Blu-ray with an excellent encode and extras including a fascinating chat track with Boorman and Steve Soderbergh. ★★★★★



The Thing
Another Blu-ray outing for John Carpenter's horror masterpiece, this time with a collection of new bonus features and upgraded 1080p visuals (from a new 4K scan of the original 35mm camera negatives). ★★★★★



King Kong [Ultra HD Blu-ray]
The big ape looks beautiful on this HDR upgrade of Peter Jackson's 2005 epic, while audio moves from DTS-HD 5.1 to DTS:X for an expansive experience. Heaps of bonus material. ★★★★★

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TOP 5 PVRs



Virgin Media TiVo, £subscription

This triple-tuner PVR offers recording flexibility, useful features – you can undelete deleted shows! – and smart TiVo functionality. If you're in a cable area, consider it

★★★★★



Sky Q, £subscription

Sky's new top-tier product offering dazzles with its image-rich user interface, wireless multiroom skills and recording flexibility delivered by the PVR's 12 tuners. Now supports 4K content

★★★★★

NEW ENTRY



Humax FVP-5000T

Revamped menus, faster operation and tweaks to its triple-tuner engine make this the most advanced Freeview Play PVR around – and it doubles admirably as a DLNA player/media jukebox. 500GB/1TB/2TB

★★★★★



Humax DTR-T4000, £subscription

This YouView-based PVR is required to get BT Sport's new Ultra HD channel – available to those with BT fast fibre and a BT TV sub. Easy to use and with 1TB of storage

★★★★★



EE TV Smart Box £subscription

This quad-tuner 1TB PVR, from the mobile/broadband corp, offers innovative Replay 24-hour channel recording and great Smart device streaming. Needs more catch-up though

★★★★★

TOP 5 Headphones



Sony MDR-HW700DS, £800

Comfy cans supplied with an HDMI surround processor, enabling multichannel audio to be fed to a virtual 9.1-channel soundstage. The effect is superb – great for late-night listening

★★★★★



Sony MDR-1000X, £360

Superior noise-cancelling cans with hi-res audio support via Sony's LDAC wireless transmission tech. Slick, touch-sensitive operation and healthy battery life. Fulsome sound and comfy to wear

★★★★★



1More MK802, £150

Ignore the bling-tastic blue or red finishes and focus on the assured sound performance from these well-priced closed-back cans. Features include wireless Bluetooth and app control (with burn-in mode). Great value

★★★★★



PSB M4U1, £220

Aimed at both home and on-the-move use (and supplied with a carry case and two cable options), the M4U1s offer solid bass response and impactful highs. Build quality is good, as is comfort

★★★★★



Audio Technica ATH-SR9, £400

45mm drivers and Audio Technica's Midpoint Mount tech deliver wide, deep, spacious sonics. Memory foam padding aids listener comfort; 3m cable should suit most AV setups.

★★★★★

TOP 5 Wireless speakers



KEF Muo, £300

Portable Bluetooth speaker that's a cut above much of the competition. KEF's sonic knowhow results in a punchy, dynamic presentation that cherishes lossless rips. Excellent build quality

★★★★★



Sony SRS-X11, £60

An affordable palm-sized Bluetooth speaker with internal rechargeable battery, Sony's SRS-X11 is supremely portable and sounds decent for the money. A neat little gizmo. Get two and they can work in stereo

★★★★★



Q Acoustics BT3, £280

Bluetooth stereo pair with optical input makes a good alternative to a soundbar (there's even a subwoofer pre-out) while remaining a dab hand at music. Neat and tidy design, good price

★★★★★



Simple Audio Listen, £400

Desktop stereo speakers with Bluetooth support, these benefit from separate tweeter/midbass units and a classy construction. Performance is well-balanced, and a subwoofer output is offered for extra bass

★★★★★



Denon HEOS 5 HS2, £350

The mid-range multiroom speaker gets a second-gen revamp, adding welcome hi-res audio playback and Bluetooth connectivity. Gorgeous looks, boisterous, room-filling sound

★★★★★

HOME CINEMA

Choice

→ IN THE NEXT ISSUE

2017 Movie Awards We round up our favourite Blu-ray and 4K releases of the last year

Living the smart life Can connected control kit improve your home cinema experience?

Readers' rooms Inside your picture palaces...

→ YEARBOOK SPECIAL

The finest AV kit of 2017, including: REL No.25 Panasonic TX-55EZ952 JVC DLA-Z1 Marantz NR1608 Focal Sib Evo Dolby Atmos Arcam AV860 PLUS News, software, opinion, installs and more!!

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CONTENTS SUBJECT TO CHANGE – BUT ONLY FOR THE BETTER



AV Avenger

When working out a budget for your AV room, says **Steve May**, first you need to consider the size of your space. And always have money left over for biscuits...

PRICE VERSUS PERFORMANCE. It's an age-old conundrum.

Normally, faced with two similar products with different tickets, most of us would conclude the cheaper item would be in some way inferior. After all, own-brand cornflakes are as cardboard shavings to Kellogg's premium-priced brekkie cereal. But in the world of home cinema, the equation is different.

This was reinforced during a visit to custom install trade supplier AWE. The distributor recently tweaked its showroom, adding a second home theatre and standalone music room to its tricked-out smart apartment and THX cinema palace. This provided me the opportunity for a unique A/B comparison.

The top theatre is built around KEF THX-certified in-wall speakers. It's a large space, 7m x 5.5m, with several rows of dedicated home theatre seating. The Dolby Atmos configuration is 7.5.4, with processing and amplification handled by a Marantz stack, comprising AV8802A processor and two massive seven-channel MM8077 power amplifiers. The projector in the room is Epson's EH-LS10500 laser model, firing onto a 133in Draper ReAct fabric screen. The total kit cost at trade prices is £30,000 approx.

The second home cinema is much smaller (5.5m x 3.5m). In fact, **it's deliberately comparable to a garage space**, and the equipment outlay here is about half that of the larger theatre. It uses Definitive Technology in-wall Reference Series speakers in a 7.4.4 Atmos configuration, driven by a lone Denon AVR-X6400H AV receiver. An Epson EH-TW9300 projects onto a 110in Draper nano-perf screen.

What's interesting when comparing the two theatres is there really is no massive disparity in performance between the rooms, because the smaller space can be driven to the same reference

level (105dB, but limited to 100dB for comfort), when room reflections are taken into account.

In some ways I actually prefer the sound in the smaller room. It has an intimacy that the larger room inevitably can't match. I also have a huge fondness for the Def Tech speakers (I've been told not to call them Def Tech, but what can you do, eh?), having used them in my own home theatre for some time. What's new here, though, are the brand's dual 10in (one passive, one active) in-wall subs. The install utilises a pair at the front, and a pair at the back, and they sound gut-wrenchingly fabulous.

My observation is that the difference in price isn't commensurate with quality, it merely reflects the reality of achieving reference-level audio in hugely different room sizes. So take heed: when spec'ing your own cinema, factor the physical space into your equipment choice. It could make a huge difference to the overall cost, without impacting enjoyment.

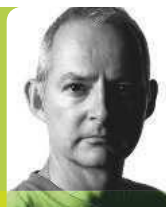
As an aside, the AWE showroom also offered the chance to listen to KEF's Blade 2 floorstanders (£16,000, or more with a fancy finish) and KEF's LS50 monitor speaker, available for a modest £800.

I'm not going to tell you there was no difference in performance, because there was. The Blades are an incredibly articulate speaker, capable of a huge spatial presentation (and the fact they were powered by Marantz Series 10 electronics certainly helped), but the LS50s, with their copper Uni-Q driver, driven by a modest midi component, certainly didn't sound the best part of £15,000 cheaper.

The best-value speakers I own are USB-powered Xentas, which cost me less than a cup of high-street coffee. I could have invested more, but opted to blow the rest of my budget on biscuits ■

*What's the best-value bit of AV kit you've owned?
Let us know: email letters@homecinemachoice.com*

Steve May actually doesn't care what brand of cornflake he has for breakfast, as long as there's a plastic toy hidden at the bottom of the box.





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